Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Issue 14.2 (Fall 2025)

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Editors’ Introduction

by Yumi Pak, Robert F. Carley, Eero Laine, SAJ, Alyson K. Spurgas and Chris Alen Sula | Issue 14.2 (Fall 2025)

ABSTRACT Reflecting on editorial labor, this introduction considers how the work of cultural studies can be furthered through community, amplification, and world-building. Advancing a curatorial, developmental model in contrast to a gatekeeping one, we consider what a horizontal approach to editing looks like in practice.

KEYWORDS cultural studies, curation, labor, publishing

Lateral operates through the labor of a team of editors who convene virtually each month. We gather from our respective living rooms and offices, the work desk that holds proofs that need re-reading, essays that need grading, the dining table from which all the clutter of eating has been temporarily removed. We meet and talk shop, discuss submissions and potential reviewers, the divvying up of tasks to make sure that we continue publishing. And too: the checking in about how things are going for each of us. The shared anxiety over draconian laws < https://www.chronicle.com/article/texas-a-m-system-sharply-restricts-how-faculty-can-teach-about-race-and-gender> limiting our ability to speak on structures of power, which are always structures of violence. The shared pleasure over a conference < https://docs.google.com/document/d/1SnnMRj7pdNAPKtg6f_tQRk_w23wLy_8y/edit> completed earlier in the spring, where several of us gathered in person—some of us meeting for the first time offline!—and missed the ones who couldn’t be there. Our numbers fluctuate. Sometimes new editors join us, and at others, some take their leave. A new editor of our "Years in Cultural Studies < https://csalateral.org/years/> " started her appointment this year; our two book editors shared news of their imminent departure. Our copyeditor is sorely missed while she is away.

The commitment that binds us in the pursuit of what cultural studies makes possible in the world, and what cultural studies does in the world, is one that centers a related question: what is an editor meant to make possible in the world? In Black studies, the role of the editor holds historical significance. From W. E. B. Du Bois as the editor of *The Crisis* to Lorraine A. Williams at *The Journal of Negro History* and Mary Ann Shadd Cary at *Provincial Freeman,* to those lesser known—or unknown—who edited manuscripts by earlier, forgotten Black writers and championed special issues of numerous academic journals, to Toni Morrison who brought the writings of Gayl Jones, Huey P. Newton, and June Jordan, among so many others, into homes across the United States during her tenure as an editor at Random House < https://www.harpercollins.com/products/toni-at-random-dana-a-williams> , it has been understood that editorial work is, by definition, a collective work of community, amplification, and world-building.

In no way do we hold ourselves as equal to the individuals named here, nor do we intend to collapse cultural studies with Black studies, but we do benefit from the lessons they've left behind and continue to share. We take seriously the responsibility with which all editors are charged: editing is a practice of curating knowledge for larger communities. We can argue that both editors and curators select materials and evaluate their "value" for larger consumption. What becomes troubling is that the language of "evaluation" also shades into the implicit—and explicit—territory of gatekeeping. Who gets to determine what or who is worthy of publishing? How might we instead imagine editing as a relationship of care, a careful reading of the scholarship of others as a response to their invitation to gather, and the extension of our own as informed by all those who have come before us, who are with us, who are yet to arrive? How might editing work to challenge the economy of prestige that so pervades academia, rather than serving to reinforce it? Can it? During a monthly meeting, one of us asked, quite seriously, what publishing might look like if rather than striving for an acceptance rate in the single digits (an endeavor that none of us actually aspires to, to begin with), *Lateral* prioritizes a developmental approach rather than a gatekeeping one. Why is that not the aspiration of academic publishing? Why is the automatic assumption that editors at academic journals will be flooded with "bad" writing and "bad" scholarship?

We do not ask these questions simply for the sake of being antagonistic or provocative, but because we are informed by our experiences in another space of curation in academia: the classroom. As instructors, we were and are always in the process of curating. The construction of any syllabus demands a similar set of questions we ask ourselves when we discuss a submission: What is this piece attempting to convey? What will the reader understand about the fields and disciplines in question if they read this piece? If we have ten to fifteen weeks to operate as conduits between the pleasures and responsibilities of what we continue to learn and students at all different stages of their journey toward the same, who, and what, do we teach? Does the process of editing change if we think about it similarly: as the opportunity to curate a reading list for students, colleagues, friends?

Publishing this fall issue of *Lateral* is generative, as the bulk of production work takes place toward the end of a calendar year. It offers us the opportunity to look back over a longer stretch of time and consider if the curating we have done during the preceding twelve months "foster[ed] experimentation and collaboration among cultural studies practitioners and researchers < https://www.culturalstudiesassociation.org/about.html> ." As befitting our name, *Lateral* operates laterally: editorial decisions are made after all editors read all submitted manuscripts. We listen to each other attentively, consider and reconsider depending on the interpretations offered, seek out reviewers who we believe would be thoughtful and ethical in their responses. There is no editor-in-chief or demarcation of seniority, no single opinion that overrides everyone else. Things can move faster at times, because there are many involved in the work; sometimes they move slower, because there are many involved in the work. But what is key, we believe, is that many are involved in the work. *Lateral* exists in the shape it does because the collective of editors is in relation to larger collectives of thinkers, because we belong to communities of readers and writers in cultural studies, performance studies, critical ethnic studies, feminist studies, queer studies, literary studies, philosophy, sociology, media studies—the list goes on and on.

This is not to glorify or romanticize our work: it's people on Zoom talking every month about deadlines, citations, and finding reviewers, among other mundane things. There is no compensation, financial or otherwise, provided by our respective places of work. We are constantly pulled in a myriad directions without pause, especially as an issue comes close to its publication date.

It is often quoted now, but its reach does not diminish its significance: "Our past is bleak. Our future dim. But I am not reasonable. A reasonable man adjusts to his environment. And unreasonable man does not. All progress, therefore, depends on the unreasonable man. I prefer not to adjust to my environment. I refuse the prison of 'I' and choose the open spaces of 'we.'"[1] And another: "'Whatever I am, whatever I can do, it's not enough,' he said. 'It's never enough,' Mead said. 'And what can anyone do alone?'"[2]

We at *Lateral* have spent the past year working in and toward that open space of "we," an open space that is much bigger than just our labor. We wish to thank those of you who are already there, and hope that others will join in 2026 and in years to come.

In This Issue

In "Spectacle, Surveillance, and Discipline: Synopticism at the Angola Prison Rodeo < https://csalateral.org/issue/14-2/spectacle-surveillance-discipline-synopticism-angola-prison-rodeo-mascarenhas/> ," Daniella Mascarenhas challenges the expectant Foucauldian configuration of discipline and biopolitics. In her analysis, the Angola Prison Rodeo publicly stages inmate risk and bodily harm as entertainment, challenging the concealment of penal violence as the requisite modern means for institutional legitimacy. Using ethnographic data from 2023–24, the study shows that spectators read spectacle through both rodeo and rehabilitation narratives. This "re-normalizes" inmate suffering by recasting punishment as "disciplined," redemptive fun. The particularities of Mascarenhas's case illustrate how inmates seek financial gain and opportunities for self-representation, however their agency is tightly constrained by institutional approval and structural coercion, making participation a governed privilege. Additionally, the rodeo produces a synoptic surveillance dynamic—where the many watch the few—that complements internal panoptic control and expands it by recruiting the public as ideological validators, informal overseers, and financial supporters of the carceral state. Framed through both Gramscian hegemony (a state-based model) and Foucauldian discipline (a diffuse and ubiquitous socialization of power), and acknowledging limits and dissenting critiques, the article poses a theoretically original argument: that highly curated spectacles and the broadening of the synoptic scope helps to re-naturalize and re-modernize incarceration, expanding its cultural and economic reach.

Madhavi Reddi and Margaret E. Foster's article, "Generationality, Desirability, and Redemption: How Aziz Ansari and Hasan Minhaj Articulate New Desi Masculinities in Stand-Up Comedy, < https://csalateral.org/issue/14-2/generationality-desirability-redemption-aziz-ansari-hasan-minhaj-new-desi-masculinities-stand-up-comedy-reddi-foster/> " offers a sweeping conjunctural critique of the seemingly progressive ways that South Asian masculinity is negotiated and asserted in the context of stand-up comedy. The article argues that stand-up comedy is a crucial arena where second-generation South Asian (Desi) men like Aziz Ansari and Hasan Minhaj construct identities and challenge stereotypes that render Desi masculinity either sexless or threatening. Despite their distinct celebrity personas—Ansari's "funny cute" and Minhaj's "principled family man"—both leverage the stage to seek cultural citizenship, critique white supremacy, and confront the interchangeability imposed by the white gaze. Their offstage scandals (Ansari's #MeToo accusation and Minhaj's alleged fabrication of racist incidents) threatened the authenticity of their onstage selves, making desirability, respectability, and trust central fault lines. Reddi and Foster argue that Ansari and Minhaj, by crafting successful comebacks, model a redemption arc that resists emasculated "model minority" scripts and advances a Model Man-adjacent Desi masculinity as a legitimate, culturally accepted form. The article, however, cautions that this redemption—and thus cultural citizenship—is facilitated by (requires in its negotiation and assertion) heteronormative, patriarchal norms, even as their careers help open space for multiple, evolving Desi masculinities in American comedy.

This issue also features the 2025 Randy Martin Prize essay, Josh Widera's "21st Century Sandwichmen: How Bicycle Couriers Contribute to Urban Food Delivery Platforms < https://csalateral.org/issue/14-2/21st-century-sandwichmen-how-bicycle-couriers-contribute-to-urban-food-delivery-platforms/> ." From ethnographic fieldwork, Widera builds a picture of the experience of a contract worker for DoorDash. By following this narrative with rich context through an exploration of the business model and history of food delivery, this article offers insights into the changing nature of twenty-first-century labor and exploitation.

Two new additions to Aporias < https://csalateral.org/archive/section/aporias/> take up timely questions in the field of cultural studies. Kevin Rigby Jr.'s "What Does Black Protest Appear to Be? < https://csalateral.org/section/aporias/what-does-black-protest-appear-to-be-rigby-jr/> ” examines the Black Lives Matter movement and the 2020 Minneapolis uprising as sites of rupture that expose the limits of visibility politics, rathern than assimilating black protest through narratives of vulnerability, loss, or redemptive spectacle. Rouzbeh Shadpey’s “Negative Evidence: The Critical-Clinical Diagnosis of Fatigue in Copjec’s Kiarostami < https://csalateral.org/section/aporias/negative-evidence-critical-clinical-diagnosis-fatigue-copjec-kiarostami-shadpey/> ” theorizes fatigue and its impossible evidentary standards in clinical and critical contexts through Joan Copjec’s essay “Battle Fatigue: Kiarostami and Capitalism” and Abbas Kiarostami’s film *Taste of Cherry*.

The latest episode of the Positions < https://csalateral.org/archive/podcasts/positions/> features Delores Phillips and Cultural Studies Association’s Crip Cultures/Critical Disability Studies Working Group Co-Host Theodora Danylevich in conversation with authors Alyson Patsavas, Alyson K. Spurgas, and Jess Whatcott on “Crip Silences, Crip Futurities, Crip Joy < https://csalateral.org/podcasts/positions/crip-silences-crip-futurities-crip-joy-phillips-patsavas-danylevich-spurgas-whatcott-carter/> .” This episode is accompanied by a scholarly commentary by Angela Carte

Finally, this issue includes a special section, Digital Platforms & Agency < https://csalateral.org/archive/section/digital-platforms-agency/> , edited by Reed Van Schenck and Elaine Venter, which situates platform studies within cultural studies, both analyzing platforms as artifacts and also seeking possibilities for disrupting their protocols. Through critical studies of Airbnb, TikTok, Instgram, digital voice assistants, dating apps, live-streaming, anti-botting, “alt-tech” social media, and facial recognition, this section interrogates the tendency to see platforms in post-racial, post-gender, and post-ability terms, instead returning attention to people and communities for whom these platforms were not design and yet whose agency interrupts these same platforms’ hegemonic logics.

Notes

1. Toni Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (Knoph: New York City, 2019. ↩
2. Ursula Le Guin, *Tales from Earthsea* (Clarion Books: New York City, 2012). ↩

Author Information

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Yumi Pak is a student, scholar, and instructor of Black literary and cultural studies, particularly within the overlaps and interstices between the United States, Scotland, and Jamaica. She is currently associate professor of Black Studies and affiliated faculty in English at Occidental College. From 2014–2022, she was assistant/associate professor of English at California State University, San Bernardino, where she also held an appointment as director of Ethnic Studies, a long-standing program on campus; in 2022, she co-founded the Department of Ethnic Studies at CSUSB. Her writing can be found in various publications, including *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, *ASAP/Journal*, *Women, Gender & Families of Color* and *Dismantle Magazine*.

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View all of Chris Alen Sula's articles.

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Spectacle, Surveillance, and Discipline: Synopticism at the Angola Prison Rodeo

by Daniella Mascarenhas | Issue 14.2 (Fall 2025)

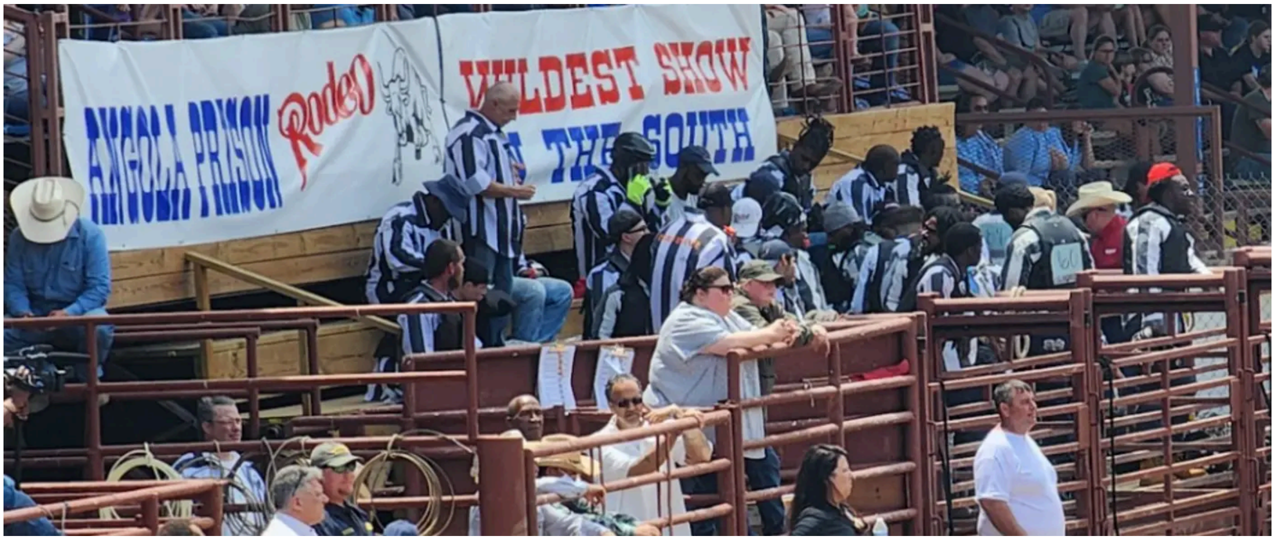
ABSTRACT The Angola Prison Rodeo is a distinctive penal spectacle that challenges conventional understandings of incarceration, visibility, and institutional legitimacy. While modern punishment typically conceals violence, the rodeo publicly stages inmate bodily harm as entertainment. Drawing on ethnographic data from the 2023 and 2024 rodeos, this research explores how such visibility paradoxically reinforces carceral authority. Spectators interpret the event through familiar cultural narratives of traditional rodeo culture and dominant rehabilitation narratives, transforming penal violence into a palatable and even celebrated ritual. Inmates, meanwhile, navigate the rodeo as a space of constrained agency, motivated by financial incentives and opportunities for self-representation. Yet inmate participation is shaped by institutional approval and structural coercion. Crucially, the rodeo produces a synoptic surveillance dynamic—where the many watch the few—that complements the prison's panoptic control, enlisting public spectatorship as both ideological legitimation and material support for the institution. By blending Gramscian cultural hegemony with Foucauldian disciplinary power, the Angola Rodeo emerges as a ritual that not only sustains but expands the cultural and economic reach of the carceral state.

KEYWORDS Angola, prison, punishment, surveillance, tourism, violence

Introduction

Five weekends a year, visitors from across the Southern United States journey to Angola, Louisiana, to attend what is proudly billed as the "Wildest Show in the South."[1] At first glance the event resembles a typical rodeo fair, complete with a stadium, an extensive hobbycraft market, live musical performances, and a variety of food stalls (see Fig. 1). However, the spectacle at Angola is unlike any other US rodeo. This one takes place inside the Louisiana State Penitentiary, a maximum-security prison. All the performers, artists, and vendors at this rodeo are incarcerated.

Established in 1965 and opened to the public in 1967, the Angola Prison Rodeo is not the first of its kind; throughout the twentieth century, prison rodeos took place in Texas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas, though all have since been discontinued. Angola's rodeo, however, endures as the longest-running and only remaining prison rodeo in the United States.


ANGOLA PRISON Rodeo
WILDEST SHOW IN THE SOUTH

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Image-1.jpg>

Figure 1. Inmates at Angola Prison waiting to compete in the "Wildest Show in the South"

Contemporary penal culture is defined by practices of selective visibility, in which the most violent, coercive, and degrading aspects of punishment are hidden behind bureaucratic procedures or architectural barriers, while carefully curated images of security, order, and rehabilitation are placed on display. As scholars have noted, the nature of penal violence itself has shifted: Public corporal punishment gave way to regulated, concealed forms of punishment such as solitary confinement, institutional neglect, or life-long incapacitation. This selective exposure both protects the prison from broader cultural scrutiny and helps embed incarceration within the realm of cultural "common sense," presenting imprisonment as an inevitable and rational response to crime.

At first glance, the Angola Prison Rodeo appears to violate these cultural norms of modern penal practice. It is a hyper-visible site of active penal tourism that challenges convention in two fundamental ways. First, as an active prison tour, it is immediately distinct because it allows the public significant, direct access to inmates. This level of access contrasts sharply with tours of other active prisons, which usually curate or strictly limit spectator interactions with incarcerated individuals. Second, the rodeo subverts the standard purpose and content of penal tourism itself. While standard penal tourism, often taking place in decommissioned prison sites, typically seeks to obscure the contemporary realities of penal violence, Angola openly showcases spectacular acts of direct corporal violence on inmates sustained before a cheering audience. Such direct and spectacular displays might seem to risk unraveling the carefully maintained legitimacy of the carceral state. Indeed, earlier studies of the Angola Rodeo have debated precisely this point: Some argue that the rodeo reveals a turn back toward overt, racialized violence to uphold prison authority, while others see it as an exceptional ritual that threatens to destabilize the moral foundation of incarceration itself.

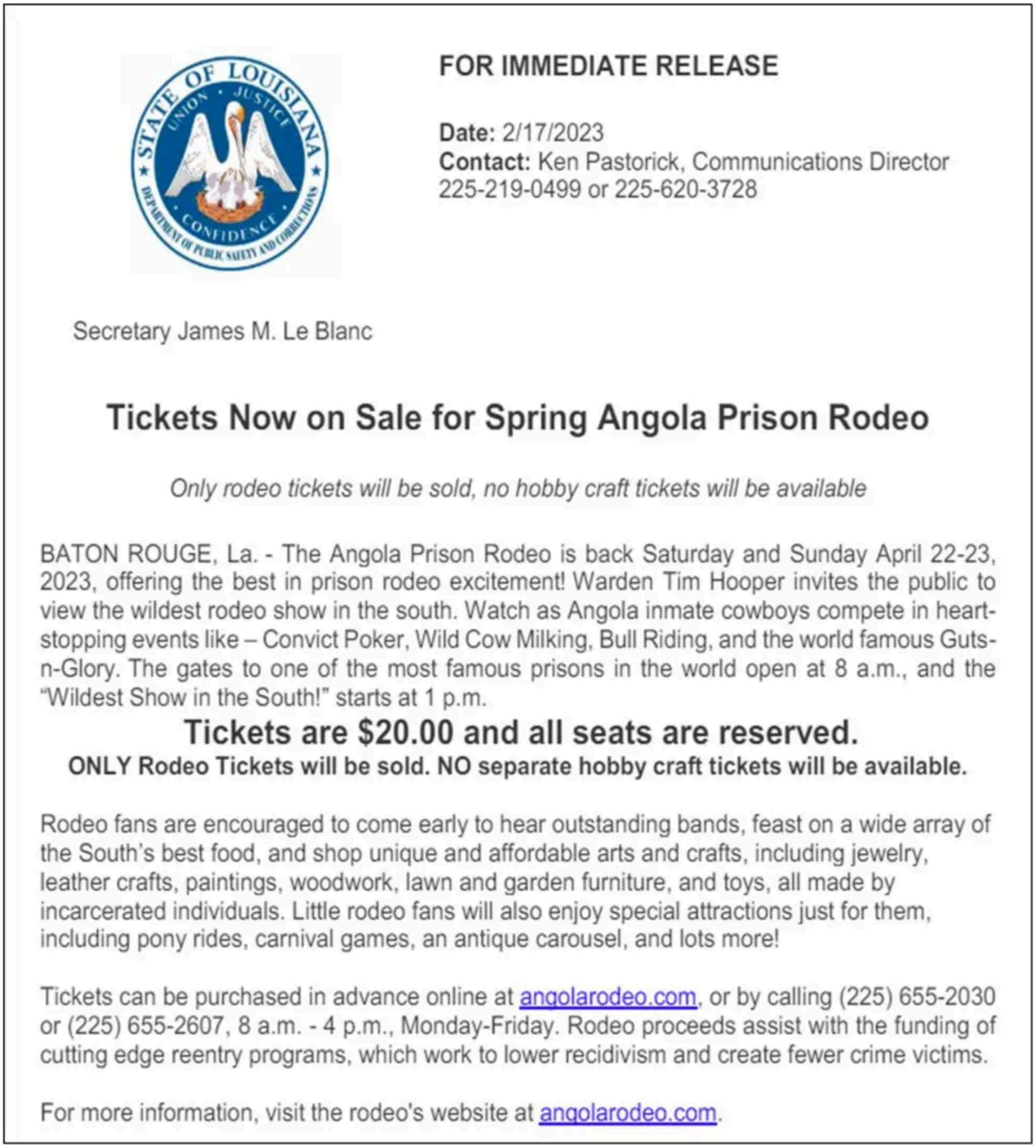
Yet despite these apparent risks, the Angola Prison Rodeo not only persists but flourishes, drawing tens of thousands of spectators and generating substantial revenue for the prison. This study addresses this puzzle by drawing on new ethnographic data from the Angola Prison Rodeo. Using a thick description methodology,[2] it examines how the rodeo becomes culturally meaningful to both spectators and inmates. Spectators view the rodeo through cultural narratives of discipline, redemption, and entertainment that normalize both imprisonment and inmate suffering as part of a natural social order. Inmates, for their part, see the rodeo as an opportunity—whether for financial gain or an assertion of personal agency—yet their choices are fundamentally shaped by the constraints of incarceration, rendering their participation structured and contingent.

Moreover, the rodeo does more than secure cultural consent of the penal institution. It also recruits the public into the prison's operations as financial supporters and informal overseers. At the Louisiana State Penitentiary, penal discipline is sustained not only through the prison's internal panoptic surveillance, where prison authorities monitor inmates; the rodeo introduces a second layer of control: synoptic surveillance, in which the many (spectators) observe the few (inmates). Spectators do not merely witness incarceration; they participate in its economic and disciplinary reproduction.

The Wildest Show in the South

The Angola Prison Rodeo takes place at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, once known as the "bloodiest prison in the South."[3] Originally established in Baton Rouge in 1844, today the prison is located on an 18,000-acre site outside the city. Now the largest correctional facility in Louisiana, it houses approximately 4,000 inmates. The prison's current location was once a slave plantation and is colloquially referred to as "Angola" after the region in Africa from which many enslaved people were taken.

The rodeo was introduced in the 1960s as part of efforts to reform the prison's violent reputation.[4] Today, it is marketed as family-friendly entertainment and an opportunity to purchase inmate-made crafts. Promotional materials for the "Wildest Show in the South" frame the rodeo as a behavioral incentive, rewarding inmates with the chance to compete in rodeo events for prize money and to sell handmade goods for profit (see Fig. 2). The event is also advertised as support for other rehabilitative programs, with a portion of the proceeds funding “cutting-edge reentry programs”[5] through the Inmate Welfare Fund.[6]



STATE OF LOUISIANA
DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY AND CORRECTIONS

Secretary James M. Le Blanc

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Date: 2/17/2023
Contact: Ken Pastorick, Communications Director
225-219-0499 or 225-620-3728

Tickets Now on Sale for Spring Angola Prison Rodeo

Only rodeo tickets will be sold, no hobby craft tickets will be available

BATON ROUGE, La. - The Angola Prison Rodeo is back Saturday and Sunday April 22-23, 2023, offering the best in prison rodeo excitement! Warden Tim Hooper invites the public to view the wildest rodeo show in the south. Watch as Angola inmate cowboys compete in heart-stopping events like – Convict Poker, Wild Cow Milking, Bull Riding, and the world famous Guts-n-Glory. The gates to one of the most famous prisons in the world open at 8 a.m., and the “Wildest Show in the South!” starts at 1 p.m.

Tickets are $20.00 and all seats are reserved.
ONLY Rodeo Tickets will be sold. NO separate hobby craft tickets will be available.

Rodeo fans are encouraged to come early to hear outstanding bands, feast on a wide array of the South’s best food, and shop unique and affordable arts and crafts, including jewelry, leather crafts, paintings, woodwork, lawn and garden furniture, and toys, all made by incarcerated individuals. Little rodeo fans will also enjoy special attractions just for them, including pony rides, carnival games, an antique carousel, and lots more!

Tickets can be purchased in advance online at angolarodeo.com, or by calling (225) 655-2030 or (225) 655-2607, 8 a.m. - 4 p.m., Monday-Friday. Rodeo proceeds assist with the funding of cutting edge reentry programs, which work to lower recidivism and create fewer crime victims.

For more information, visit the rodeo's website at angolarodeo.com.

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Image-2-1.jpg>

Figure 2. Official press release advertising the Angola Prison Rodeo.

Held six times each year (four Sundays in October and one weekend in April), the rodeo takes place within a large fairground inside the prison grounds. The rodeo stadium accommodates over 10,000 spectators, with tickets typically selling out in advance. Admission costs $20.00, and proceeds from ticket sales and hobbycraft purchases are directed to the Inmate Welfare Fund (see Fig. 3).

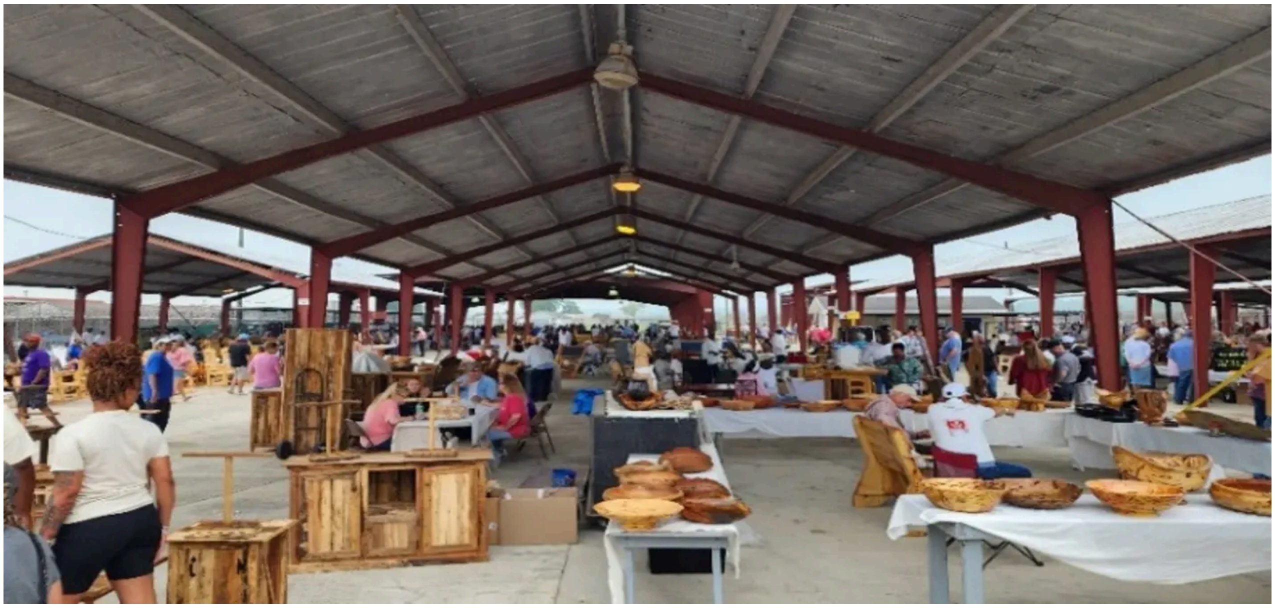


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Figure 3. Typical hobbycraft setup.

During the April 2024 event, inmates reported that the prison takes 20% of credit card and 15% of cash hobbycraft sales, while inmates retain the rest of their sold profit. A 2017 legislative audit for the rodeo revealed that the rodeo generates over $6 million annually for the prison.[7]

Visitors are allowed into the prison grounds at 8:00 a.m., and many arrive around 10:00 a.m. to browse the hobbycraft stalls. These stalls offer a variety of inmate-produced items, including paintings, wood carvings, leatherwork, and jewelry. Inmates selling hobbycraft are divided into two groups: trustees, who interact directly with customers, and “big-stripe” inmates, who sell their items from behind a chain-link fence on the periphery of the rodeo grounds (see Fig. 4). Although inmates set the prices, prison employees and correctional officers facilitate the sales.

The rodeo itself starts at 1:00 p.m. and lasts about two to three hours. It opens with a Grand Entry featuring several ceremonial elements: the National Anthem, a prayer circle, and a procession by the Angola Rodeo Rough Riders, a group of inmates who ride into the stadium on horseback.

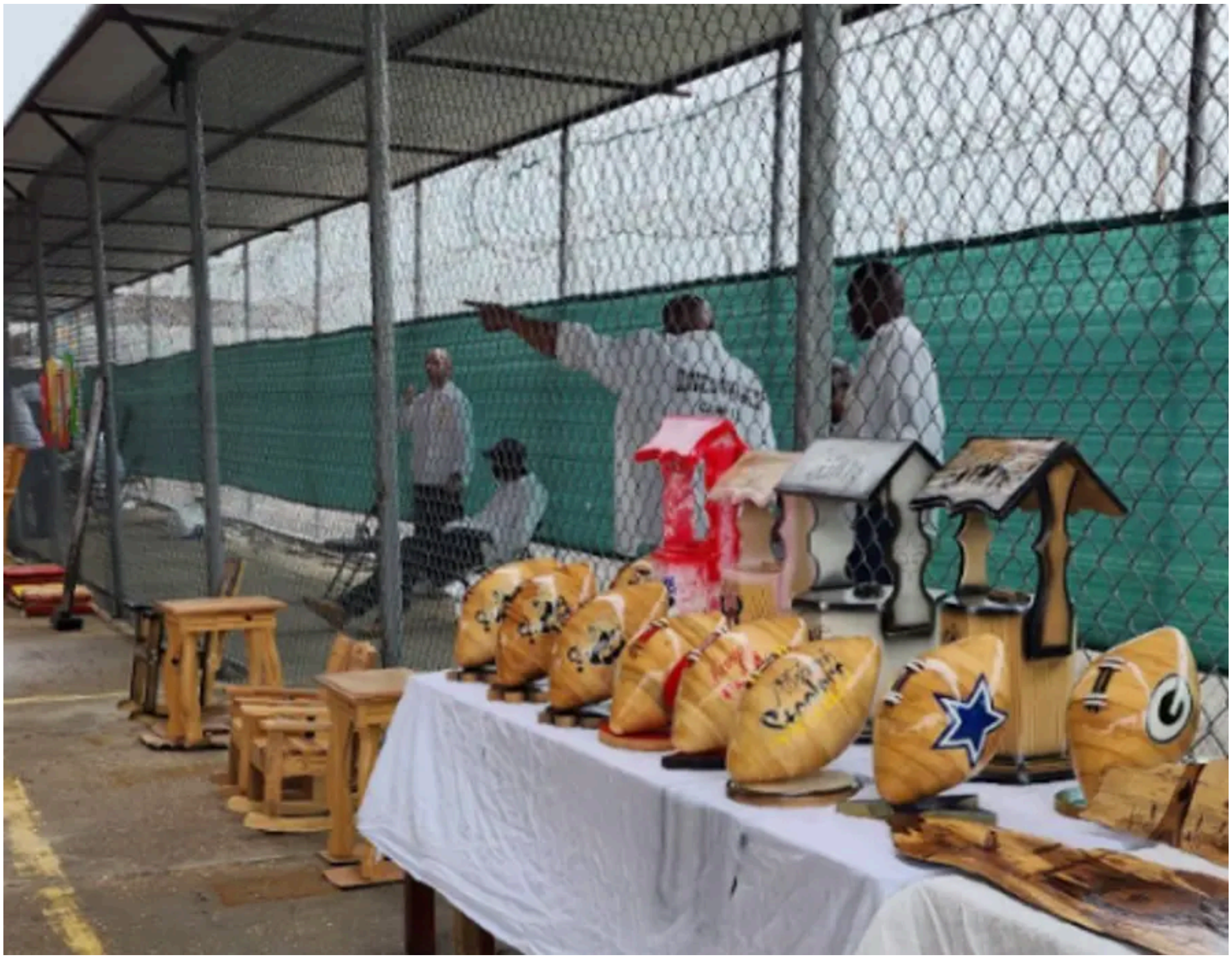

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Figure 4. “Big-Stripe” inmates selling hobbycraft from behind a chain-link enclosure.

While the rodeo includes traditional events such as bull riding and bareback bronco riding, it is best known for competitions unique to Angola. In Convict Poker, for instance, inmates sit in plastic chairs at a card table while a bull is released into the arena; the last inmate remaining in their seat wins $500. Other events, such as Ring of Fire and Convict Pinball, follow a similar “last man standing” format. The day’s final event, Guts and Glory, is heavily advertised and draws particular attention. In this event, around forty inmates try to grab a poker chip attached to a bull’s forehead. The winner of Guts and Glory receives $1,000 (see Fig. 5).

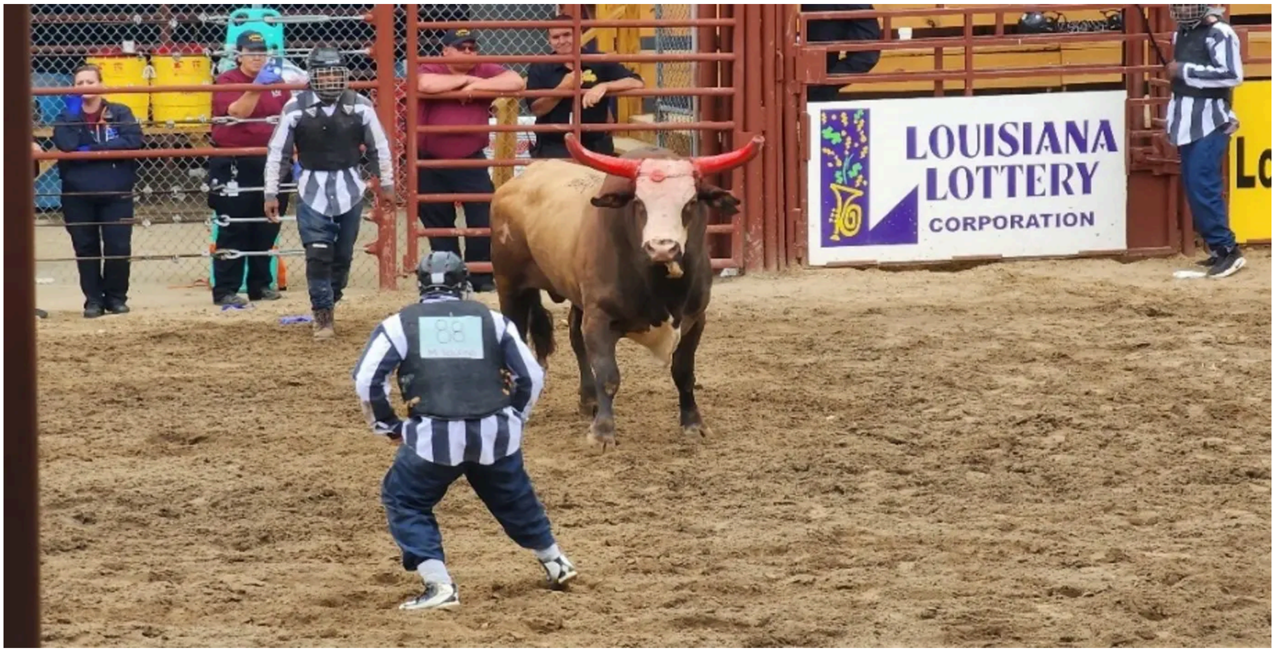

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Figure 5. An inmate confronting the bull during Guts and Glory. Photo by Ronald Tolie, used with permission.

While the rodeo events are the main attraction, spectators spend much of their day browsing hobbycraft stalls and interacting with inmates. Before the event begins, visitors can observe the preparation process in the stadium, watching as animals are brought into the chutes and inmates ready themselves for competition. Rough Riders often engage with families near the stadium entrance, allowing children to pet their horses (see Fig. 6). Spectators and inmates are only definitively separated once the rodeo begins, with visitors seated in designated areas and inmate participants near the animal chutes.

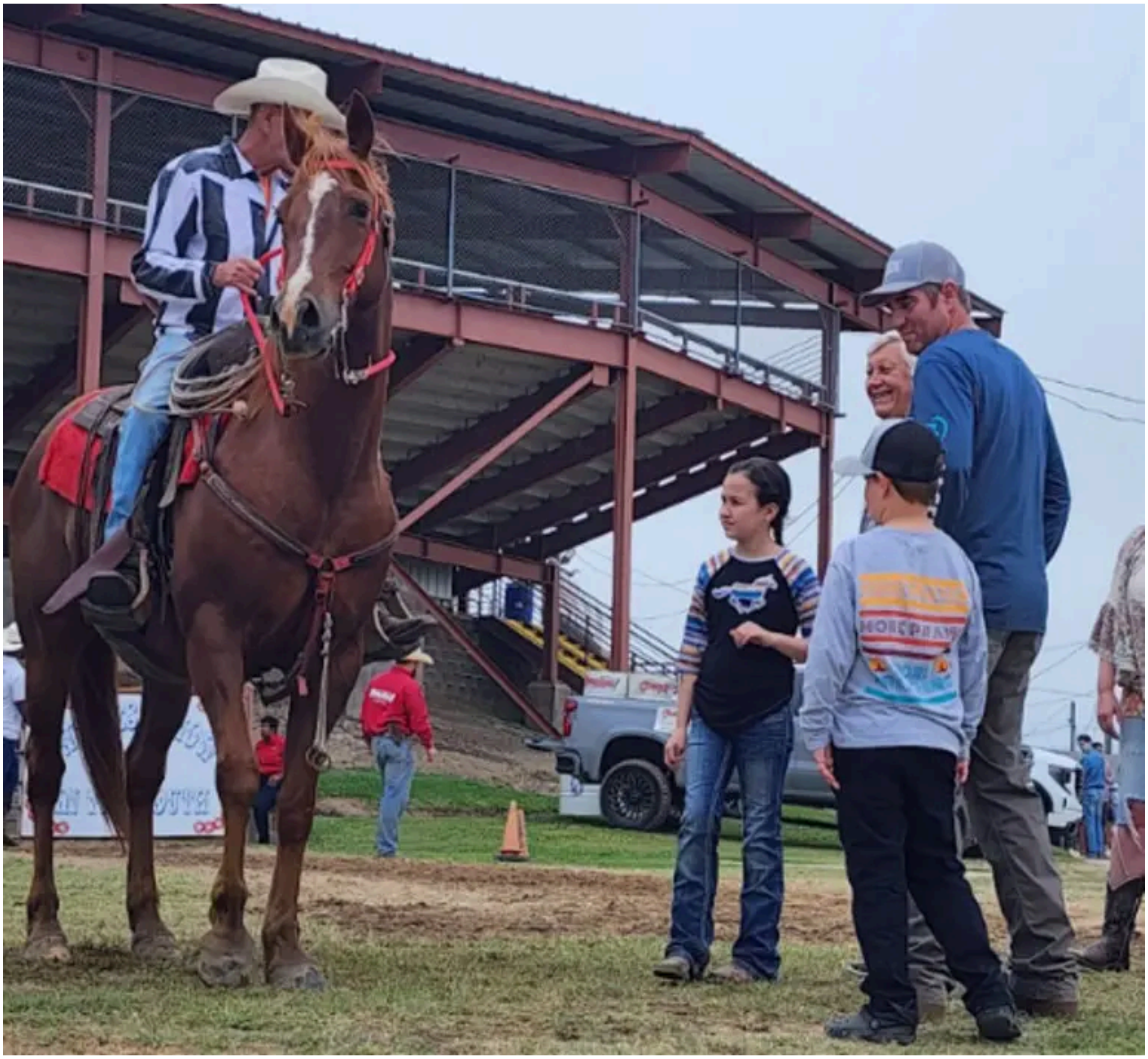

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Figure 6. Rough Rider rodeo participant outside the stadium showing his horse to a family before the rodeo.

The Puzzle of Visibility and Legitimacy at Angola

The Angola Prison Rodeo presents a striking paradox. In an era when incarceration is typically removed from public life—by geographic isolation, bureaucratic procedure, and institutional opacity—this event thrusts the prison dramatically into public view, offering unusual access to a penal institution rarely seen so openly. This paradox invites reconsideration of how punishment is made visible and legitimated in modern society.

Michel Foucault famously argued in *Discipline and Punish*[8] that punishment moved behind prison walls not to become more humane, but to preserve state legitimacy. Public executions once dramatized sovereign power, but as they increasingly provoked sympathy for the condemned and threatened authority, they were replaced by bureaucratic, routinized forms of discipline. The modern prison, in this account, becomes what Erving Goffman describes as a total institution[9]: a closed, regimented system removed from daily life and largely hidden from public view. According to Foucault, concealment is not incidental but essential, allowing disciplinary power to operate more efficiently, quietly, and with less resistance.

As Bernard Harcourt and Loïc Wacquant argue, modern prison system maintains its authority by rendering incarcerated people socially invisible to avoid deeper public scrutiny [10] Yet, this structure simultaneously exerts enormous influence over economic structures, racial hierarchies, and public policy [11]

As a site of social death,[12] the prison materially and symbolically erases incarcerated people from civic life, defining who can and cannot participate as full members of society. Its influence is all the more powerful because it is often misrecognized—visible in certain curated ways but seldom interrogated as a political institution whose legitimacy might be fundamentally challenged.

To understand how such an erasure is sustained, Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony is instructive.[13] For Gramsci, state power endures not only through coercion but through cultural consent, produced by rituals, narratives, and symbols that render domination "common sense."[14] In this framework, the question is not simply whether the prison is visible or hidden, but how it is made visible and under what ideological terms that normalize such an institution. Visibility itself becomes a political project—managed to secure consent.

This dynamic is evident in the broader cultural transformations that gave rise to the modern prison.[15] Scholars like Norbert Elias and Pieter Spierenburg described how evolving norms around civility reduced public tolerance for overt spectacles of state violence.[16] Philip Smith similarly argued that public executions became "polluted rituals," losing their legitimacy once they were seen as morally excessive.[17] As punishment retreated from open display, it was embedded in institutions that appeared rational, neutral, and humane. In this way, the prison evolved not only as a disciplinary apparatus but also as a cultural institution whose legitimacy depended on aligning with prevailing standards of justice, order, and rehabilitation.[18]

Thus, cultural hegemony is secured not through deception alone, but through repetition, affect, and symbolic framing that translate state violence into common sense. Cultural forms allow punishment to be not only seen but also emotionally experienced and narratively justified—making spectacle itself a tool of governance. Crucially, modern penal institutions do not simply conceal or reveal; they carefully curate what is made public and under what conditions. This selective visibility creates an illusion of transparency while shielding deeper institutional logics from scrutiny. Rather than threatening legitimacy, selective visibility can potentially bolster legitimacy.

Selective visibility also helps to resolve core tensions in contemporary US penal culture. On one hand, US public opinion remains unusually punitive, with strong support for incarceration as a response to crime.[19] Yet there is also cultural pressure to see the prison as humane, rehabilitative, and morally justified.[20] This paradox creates a demand for visibility that reassures without undermining faith in the institution. Even when aspects of carceral harm become public through documentaries or media reports, they are often framed in ways that neutralize their critical potential. Structural violences such as solitary confinement, exploitative labor, medical neglect, and excessive force persist at the heart of incarceration,[21] yet are rationalized as bureaucratic routine—not seen as the spectacular cruelty of the scaffold that Foucault described.

This ideological process is also deeply racialized in the United States. As scholars such as Angela Davis and Simone Browne argued, the US prison cannot be understood apart from the legacies of racial domination that shaped it.[22] The narratives that frame imprisonment as necessary or redemptive are themselves products of a post-slavery racial order that continues to define who is punishable and how. Joy James describes how the disciplinary logic of the plantation was reconstituted in the prison, rendering Blackness criminalized and Black bodies perpetual objects of state surveillance and cultural punishment.[23] In this context, carceral visibility does not interrupt systemic violence; it makes it culturally legible and acceptable, embedding it as a familiar feature of the US social order.

Of course, this is not to deny the long histories of prison reform or abolitionist critique. Indeed, movements for prison reform have often driven the “civilizing” shifts in penal practice. Contemporary abolitionist critics offer sustained challenges to the prison’s legitimacy itself.[24] Yet these remain countercurrents within a broader cultural hegemony that rarely questions the prison as a foundational institution.

Visibility, Violence, and Legitimacy at the Penal Tour

Most forms of penal tourism closely adhere to practices of selective visibility. Penal tourism usually takes place in now-defunct prisons (e.g., Alcatraz,[25] Eastern State Penitentiary,[26] or Robben Island[27]) and the tours largely dwell on historical brutality, presenting past penal practices as excessively harsh and outdated. These sites cater to the morbid curiosity of dark tourism,[28] blending education with entertainment,[29] while romanticizing or abstracting the suffering of former prisoners.[30] At the same time, they omit the bureaucratized violences that define modern incarceration, implicitly framing today's prison as more humane and progressive by contrast. Even tours of active prisons maintain this selective visibility.[31] Interactions with incarcerated people, if permitted at all, are highly choreographed under the watchful eye of correctional authorities. What is revealed and what remains concealed is curated to serve institutional interests, offering a controlled glimpse that reinforces the legitimacy of the carceral state.

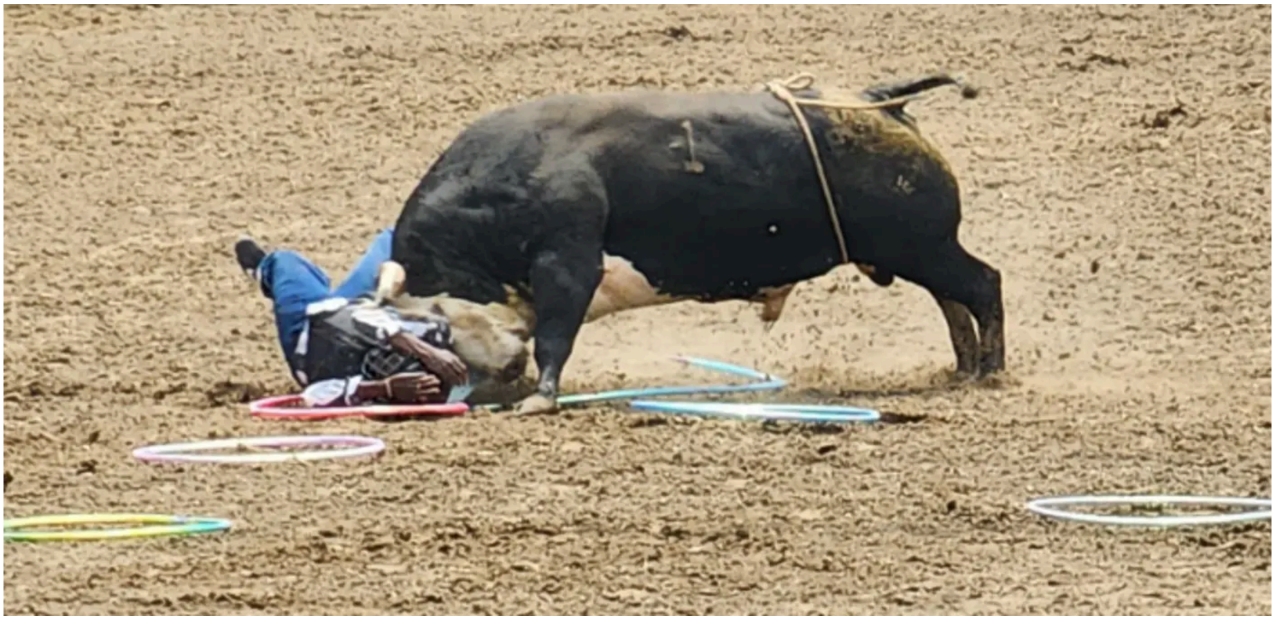

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Figure 7. Inmate being hit by a bull during Convict Pinball. Photo by Ronald Tolie, used with permission.

Against this backdrop, the Angola Prison Rodeo appears to violate these norms of selective exposure. Unlike traditional penal tours, the rodeo grants spectators direct, informal access to incarcerated individuals. Inmates sell hobbycraft, converse with visitors, and perform publicly with minimal supervision. Correctional officers largely recede into the background, temporarily suspending the strict social divisions that typically define incarceration. This seemingly open interaction disrupts expectations of the total institution as a sealed, tightly monitored space.

Even more striking is how the Angola Rodeo makes violence spectacularly visible. Unlike the hidden, bureaucratic harms that characterize most prison life (e.g., solitary confinement, exploitative labor, or medical neglect) the rodeo presents overt physical risk staged before a cheering audience (see Fig. 7). The very architecture of the arena evokes Foucault's pre-modern spectacle of the scaffold, drawing collective attention to the suffering body within the prison's walls.

Crucially, the violence at Angola is not merely a hidden undercurrent of punishment but a public performance. It also differs markedly from conventional rodeos, where risk is mitigated by skill, training, and professional expertise. In Angola's events like Convict Poker or the Ring of Fire, inmates often participate with little preparation, facing hazards that depend more on chance and endurance than on practiced technique. This dramatically increases the likelihood of serious injury. During the April 2024 rodeo, for instance, an inmate was thrown from a horse and left the arena in an ambulance.

While participation in the rodeo is officially presented as voluntary, this voluntariness is deeply structured by the punitive realities of incarceration. Inmates navigate decisions about whether to compete within a landscape of economic deprivation, restricted autonomy, and institutional pressures that transform consent into a negotiation inside a fundamentally coercive system. In this context, what appears as choice is itself a mode of discipline, compelling inmates to weigh bodily risk against the scarcity and constraints of prison life. As a result, the harm endured in the rodeo is not simply collateral—it is a continuation of the prison's punitive regime, recast as personal decision. The rodeo thus fuses the bureaucratic constraints of modern incarceration with a resurrected spectacle of corporeal jeopardy, producing a form of punishment that is simultaneously indirect and overtly corporal.[32]

This level of explicit violence situated within a prison context runs counter to the hegemonic cultural expectation that contemporary incarceration should be minimally violent and bureaucratically humane. Penal institutions generally sustain legitimacy by distancing themselves from overt physical harm, masking structural violence within routines that appear rational and rehabilitative. By contrast, the Angola Prison Rodeo places incarcerated bodies and their suffering on open display, unsettling the cultural logics that typically uphold the prison's moral authority.

This unusual visibility complicates how we understand the maintenance of penal legitimacy. It raises critical questions about whether such spectacles reinforce the cultural common sense that sustains incarceration or risk exposing its contradictions.

Previous Studies and the Legitimacy of the Prison

Scholars of the Angola Prison Rodeo have long recognized the paradox it poses for understanding visibility and legitimacy in the penal sphere. On one hand, by placing incarcerated people on public display in moments of profound vulnerability and risk, the rodeo appears to threaten the very social order it seeks to uphold.[33] Jessica Adams, for example, argues that the event "presents the spectacle of social order as constantly endangered at the very site of its enforcement."[34] Public interactions with inmates temporarily collapse the boundary between incarceration and freedom, raising the possibility that spectators might not only glimpse the realities of prison life but also question the broader cultural logics that sustain it.

Yet despite these potentially subversive elements, the Angola Prison Rodeo has persisted as a celebrated tradition for over sixty years. Mary Rachel Gould contends that rather than undermining the prison’s authority, the rodeo ultimately reaffirms it. Drawing on Foucault’s concept of the scaffold, she suggests that staging inmate risk and suffering before a crowd serves as a demonstration of the prison’s power to discipline and endanger those it confines.[35] Still, this analysis leaves open a critical question: By what broader cultural mechanisms does such a violent spectacle become absorbed, rendered legitimate, and even celebrated within a penal culture that otherwise claims to be bureaucratic and humane?

Some scholars locate the answer in racialized logics. Kathryn Gillespie argues that the rodeo reinforces penal practices that normalize violence against the inmates’ body normally associated with Blackness.[36] This connection is particularly pronounced at Angola, a former plantation now functioning as a penal institution with a predominantly Black population (72.4%), 78.8% of whom are serving life sentences.[37] Inmates at Angola labor for as little as two cents an hour, cultivating crops like cotton, corn, and milo—commodities sold for public profit.[38] As Andrea Armstrong argues, this system represents a modern iteration of racialized labor, embedding Angola within a historical continuum of slavery and state-sanctioned violence.[39] Within such a context, the rodeo’s spectacle of harm is less an aberration than an extension of cultural frameworks that have long rendered violence against Black bodies acceptable.

Others emphasize that this is not simply a hidden or residual dynamic. Melissa Schrift challenges the notion that penal violence has disappeared into bureaucratic obscurity, arguing instead that the Angola Rodeo satisfies a cultural appetite for witnessing real-time harm on the condemned body.[40] Unlike heritage tours of closed prisons that safely historicize brutality, the rodeo caters to fascination with immediate, embodied suffering. From this perspective, the rodeo does not contradict modern penal sensibilities so much as reveal a society increasingly comfortable with spectacular forms of punishment.

Despite substantial scholarship, there remains little consensus on what precisely the Angola Prison Rodeo accomplishes, culturally or ideologically. Existing analyses variously portray it as destabilizing, reaffirming, or simply perpetuating the racialized violence at the heart of US punishment. What remains underexplored are the concrete mechanisms through which such a visibly violent and seemingly archaic practice maintains legitimacy—not only among outside spectators, but also among those inside the prison who help produce it.

Moreover, much of this scholarship centers external audiences while overlooking the perspectives of incarcerated participants themselves. This is a significant omission. Inmates are not passive objects of display; they are active performers whose decisions to participate, and interpretations of what that participation means, are crucial to how the rodeo operates and resonates culturally. Their experiences reveal how carceral power adapts under cultural and ideological pressures, transforming structural coercion into apparent choice.

By foregrounding both spectator perceptions and inmates’ own accounts, this study addresses these gaps. Drawing on new ethnographic data from the 2023 and 2024 rodeos, it examines how the Angola Prison Rodeo functions not merely as a spectacle imposed from above, but as a relational, participatory process that underwrites penal legitimacy from within—blending cultural consent in a Gramscian sense with the diffuse disciplinary power Foucault describes. In doing so, it illuminates how the prison continues to entrench itself as both a social and moral institution, even in forms that appear most at odds with modern sensibilities.

Methodology

This study employs an interpretive ethnographic approach to investigate how the Angola Prison Rodeo reproduces carceral power through spectacle, ritual, and affect, shaping public and inmate perceptions of incarceration and legitimacy. Drawing on Clifford Geertz's method of thick description,[41] the analysis situates participants' actions and interpretations within broader cultural "webs of significance,"[42] revealing how cultural consent and disciplinary power intersect at the rodeo.

Data Collection

Ethnographic data were collected at the Angola Prison Rodeos on October 15, 2023, and April 20, 2024 through a combination of semi-structured interviews, field observations, and media analysis.[43]

Interviews were conducted with nine spectators and eight inmates, recruited through convenience and snowball sampling.[44] All participants provided informed consent and were anonymized to protect confidentiality, which was especially important for incarcerated respondents. Interviews addressed perceptions of incarceration, motivations for attending or participating, reactions to the rodeo's risks, and views on public visibility and social engagement. Conducted informally on-site, interviews encouraged candid reflections.

Field observations documented the spatial, performative, and symbolic dimensions of the rodeo. Particular attention was given to how visibility was structured through the layout of the grounds, inmate-spectator interactions, and the choreography of events that spotlighted inmate bodies. Photographic records complemented these observations by capturing the rodeo's physical settings, hobbycraft markets, and staged competitions.

To contextualize these firsthand accounts, a media analysis examined promotional materials, advertisements, and journalistic coverage of the rodeo. This provided insight into how the event was framed for broader audiences and how such representations contributed to sustaining the prison's cultural legitimacy.

Analytical Approach

Data analysis followed an iterative thematic coding process[45] that produced four interrelated themes: (1) "Visibility and the Spectacle of Incarceration**,**" examining how the rodeo manages penal visibility; (2) "Rehabilitation and Performance," exploring the narratives of reform as experienced by inmates and spectators; (3) "Violence and Redemption," addressing how cultural factors mitigate perceptions of harm; and (4) "Synopticism and Penal Authority," considering how the event recruits spectators into the prison's disciplinary regime, normalizing carceral power through participatory observation.

Visibility and the Spectacle of Incarceration

The Angola Prison Rodeo offers the public unprecedented access to inmates within a penal institution, but this visibility is not unmediated. The visible prison is carefully curated to prioritize spectacle over scrutiny. Rather than exposing the structural realities of incarceration, the rodeo reframes them through performance, producing an experience that is emotionally engaging but ideologically contained. The rodeo constructs a visible, participatory spectacle that shapes public perceptions of the prison—simultaneously reinforcing its legitimacy even as inmates attempt to assert narratives that complicate or contest it.

Spectating the Hidden Prison

Promotional materials for the Angola Rodeo openly acknowledge its prison setting but primarily frame the event as family entertainment rather than as a genuine encounter with the penal system. This framing is reinforced upon arrival. Spectators pass through checkpoints marked by barbed wire, watchtowers, and armed guards—unmistakable emblems of incarceration. Yet once inside, these carceral symbols recede as visitors are funneled into spaces designed for leisure: carnival rides, live music, concession stands, and a bustling marketplace (see Fig. 8).

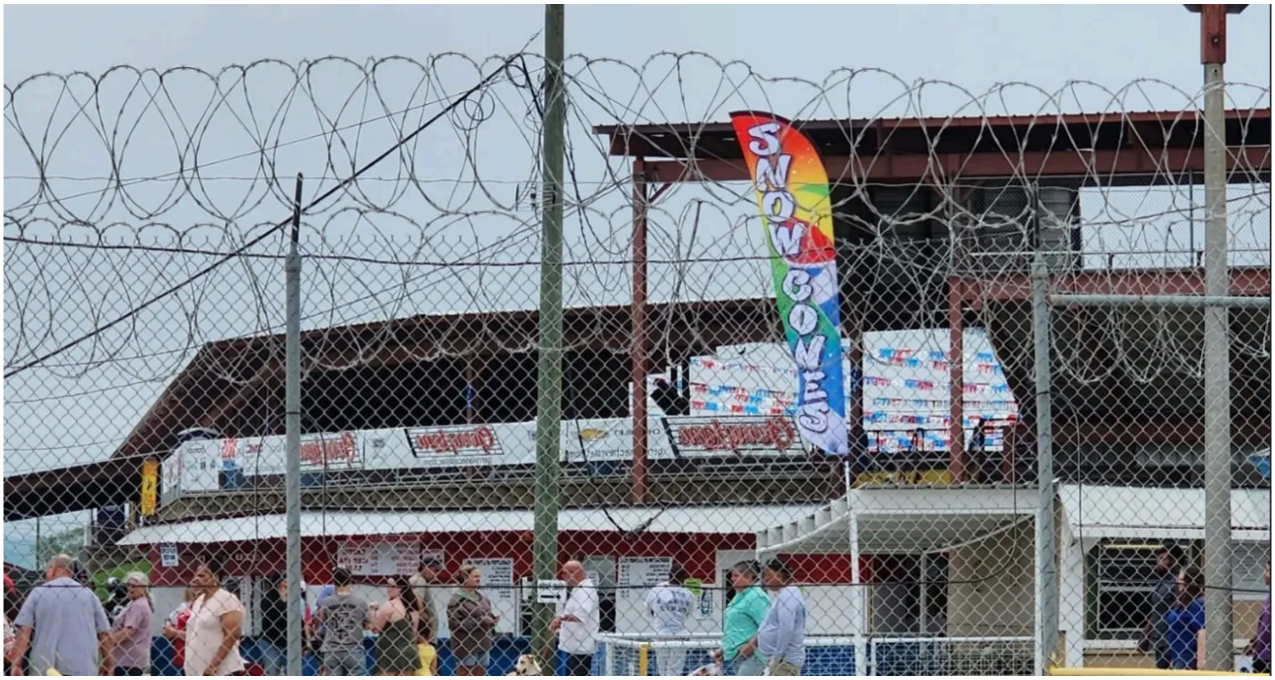

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Figure 8. Barbed wire and chain link fences surround the event space. Inside spectators mill around the concessions stands with the stadium arena in the background.

This spatial choreography offers a carefully managed glimpse of the prison, shielding its more routine forms of deprivation, discipline, and control. Instead of confronting the underlying structural violence of incarceration, visitors are invited to experience the prison through affective and aesthetic encounters that render it approachable—even charming.

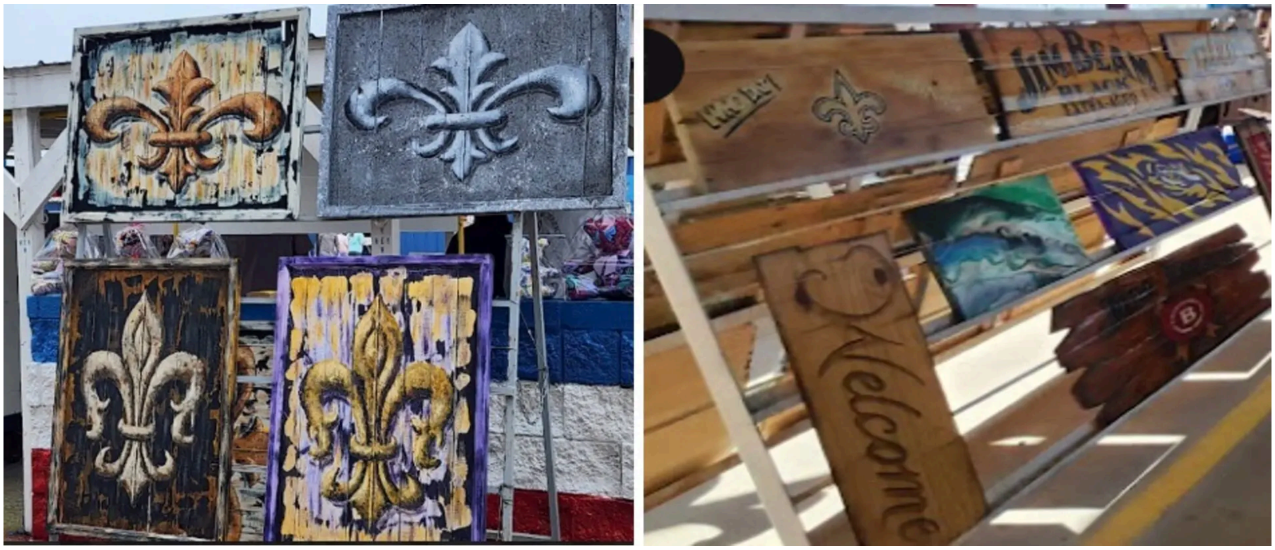

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Figure 9. Hobbycraft catering to Louisiana culture.

Interviews with spectators underscore this framing. When asked why they attended, seven respondents emphasized entertainment, describing the event as part of a broader Southern rodeo tradition. One regular attendee of regional rodeos characterized Angola's event simply as another stop on his circuit. Others highlighted the appeal of inmate-made crafts—often featuring local icons like the fleur-de-lis or Louisiana sports teams (see Figs. 9–10)—treating these items as artisanal curiosities detached from their carceral origins. Some highlighted the appeal of the rodeo as stemming from its family-friendly attractions like carnival rides and live music (n = 4). Even visitors who had incarcerated relatives at Angola (n = 2) focused on the day's recreational aspects, relegating the prison context to the background.

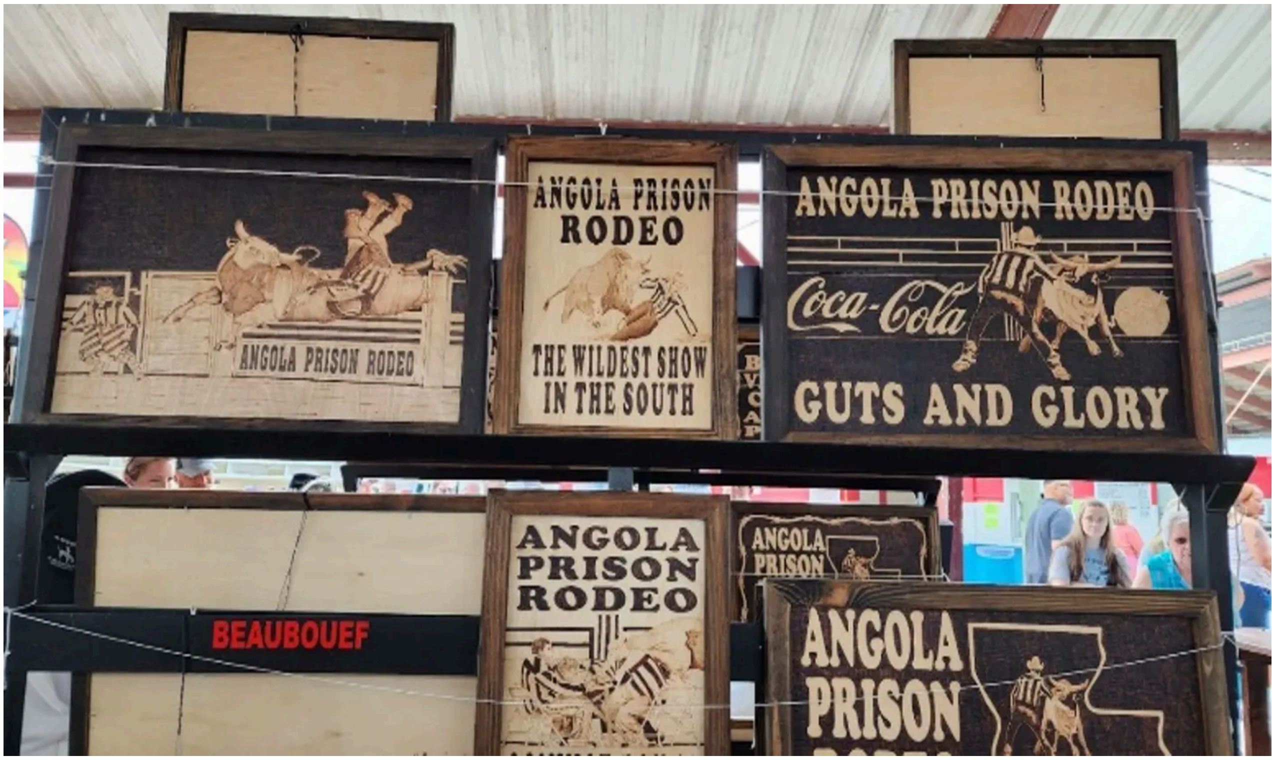
ANGOLA PRISON RODEO
ANGOLA PRISON RODEO
THE WILDEST SHOW IN THE SOUTH
ANGOLA PRISON RODEO
Coca-Cola
GUTS AND GLORY
BEAUBOUEF
ANGOLA PRISON RODEO
ANGOLA PRISON
ANGOLA PRISON

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Figure 10. Inmate-produced art promoting rodeo culture.

In these ways, the Angola Prison Rodeo transforms the visibility of the prison into a marketable spectacle. It invites the public to engage with incarceration not as a site of punishment and constraint, but as a venue for entertainment and consumption.

Inmate Visibility as Cultural Challenge

While spectators largely consume the Angola Prison Rodeo as entertainment, incarcerated individuals use the event to assert a more complex kind of visibility—one that subtly contests dominant perceptions of imprisonment. Visuality, as Nicholas Mirzoeff defines it, is not merely the act of seeing; it is a political system that organizes what can be seen, by whom, and for what ends.[46] Emerging alongside the projects of slavery and empire, visuality naturalizes social hierarchies and legitimates domination by determining whose lives are rendered visible, and in what ways. Within this framework, incarcerated people are largely subjected to a carceral visual regime that keeps them out of public sight—socially and spatially removed—except when institutions selectively display them in ways that reinforce their subordinate status and uphold the legitimacy of punitive systems.

Yet at the rodeo, incarcerated individuals seize on this carefully controlled moment of visibility to challenge the meanings imposed upon them. Many engage in what Mirzoeff terms countervisuality: collective practices through which marginalized groups assert the right to be seen differently, or on their own terms. In interviews, most inmates (N = 7) described the rodeo as a chance to challenge entrenched stereotypes and reassert their humanity. As one participant put it:

> People come in here under one perception. They freak out when they see an inmate convicted of murder being this close to you. Then they see that we're not obviously this way. We are just like them. The only difference is we're behind a fence and they're not.

In these moments, incarcerated individuals sought not to erase their status as prisoners, but to redefine it—presenting themselves not as dangerous others, but as complex, moral subjects. This offers a subtle, yet deliberate critique of the prison system's social logics (see Fig. 11).

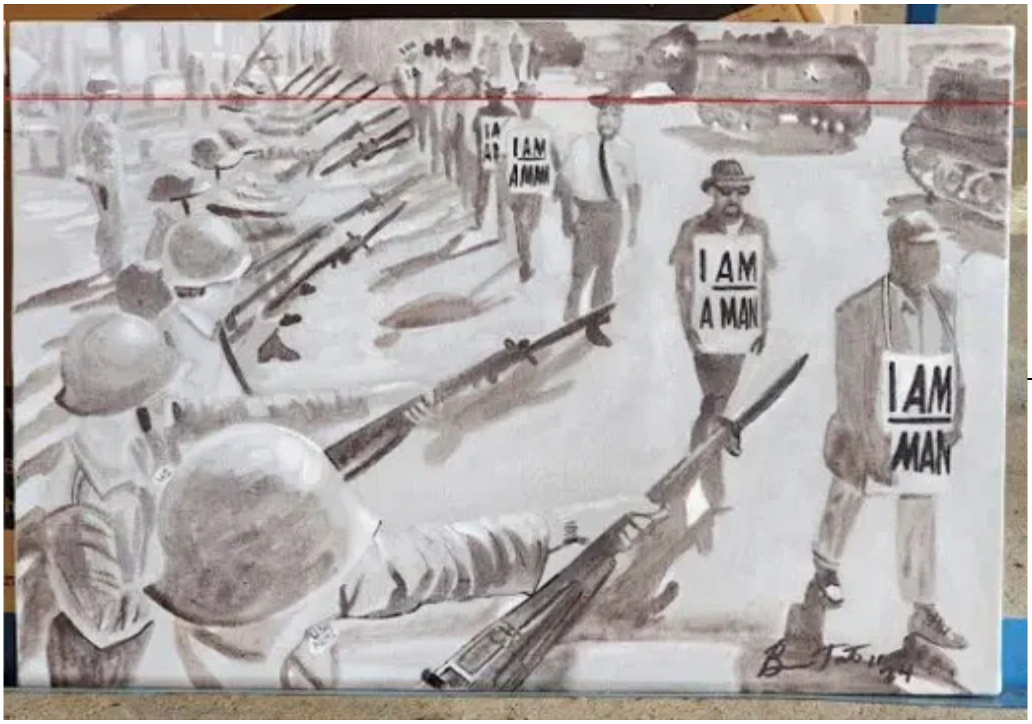

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Figure 11. Inmate art reflecting sentiments of countervisuality.

However, this countervisuality is tightly constrained by the structure of the event. The rodeo’s consumer-driven, celebratory framework shapes the kinds of visibility inmates can safely inhabit. Uniformly dressed in jeans and white shirts, inmates move through roles as artisans, performers, and vendors—identities legible within a logic of entertainment and commerce, but which obscure the daily realities of confinement and control. Interactions with spectators rarely broached the subject of imprisonment directly, instead centering on craft sales, personal charm, or performances that entertained and reassured.

Inmate-produced hobbycraft exemplifies this dynamic. Crafts rarely addressed the experience of incarceration itself, focusing instead on culturally resonant themes like regional sports or rodeo imagery (see Figs. 9–10). These choices reflected inmates’ strategic awareness of market demand; prior research has shown that crafts explicitly referencing prison life are less likely to sell. While some inmates created pieces highlighting the carceral setting (see Fig. 12), these were rare and often overshadowed by decorative or utilitarian items like cutting boards, leather goods, and jewelry—objects devoid of overt critique. Thus, inmates' ability to engage in countervisuality remained sharply limited by the consumption-oriented structure of the event, which ensured that spectators encountered little direct challenge to prevailing ideas about punishment.

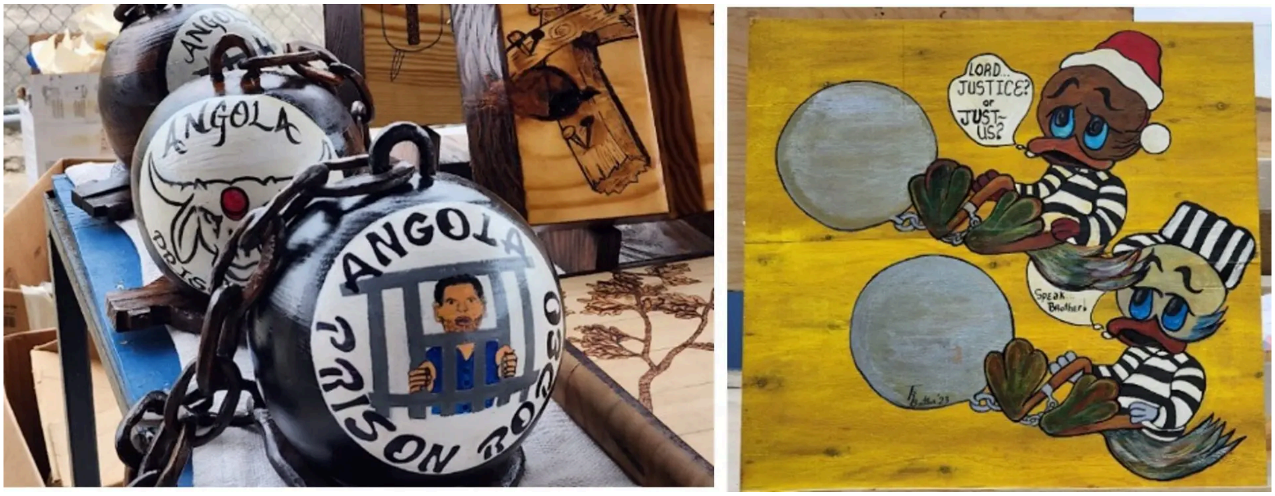

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Figure 12. Rare instances of hobbycraft depicting prison life.

Class Divisions and Tacit Legitimacy

The tension between inmates' constrained efforts at countervisuality and spectators' primarily entertainment-driven engagement reveals a broader pattern of managed carceral visibility. While the rodeo appears to break down entrenched class divisions between the incarcerated and the free—allowing unprecedented interaction—this proximity is tightly orchestrated. Rather than collapsing social hierarchies as previous scholars have argued,[47] the event repackages them into a structure of consumption that privileges the comfort and expectations of spectators.

Unlike traditional penal tourism, which often focuses on historical punishment and invites limited reflection on the past,the Angola Prison Rodeo obscures both historical and contemporary functions of incarceration. It stages no tours of cell blocks, no discussions of sentencing, no depictions of solitary confinement or forced labor. Instead, like carefully managed tours of active prisons, the rodeo shapes the spectator experience through spatial choreography and thematic framing. Visitors are steered toward sanctioned sites where incarceration is aestheticized and stripped of its political and structural dimensions.

This curated visibility offers the illusion of access while reinforcing dominant ideologies of incarceration. By allowing spectators to see inmates only within festive, market-driven contexts, the rodeo aestheticizes imprisonment, converting it into a spectacle of leisure that demands no substantive critique. The inmate becomes legible not as a political subject, but as a craftsperson, a performer, or a source of thrilling risk—figures that ultimately bolster, rather than unsettle, the legitimacy of the institution.

In this way, the Angola Prison Rodeo demonstrates that visibility itself can be a powerful mechanism of cultural legitimation. It constructs a version of the prison that is entertaining, emotionally resonant, and aligned with broader cultural values about punishment.

Rehabilitation and Performance

While the day-to-day realities of penal life are obscured from the public, the Angola Prison Rodeo selectively stages visibility to align with dominant cultural expectations of the prison as a rehabilitative institution. As Benjamin Reiss observes, nineteenth-century asylums often organized concerts, plays, and art exhibits to demonstrate residents' supposed moral improvement, reinforcing the institution's legitimacy.[48] Similarly, the Angola Prison Rodeo transforms the penitentiary into a theatrical space where inmates' performances symbolize rehabilitation under institutional guidance. Even when inmates attempt to resist or reinterpret this framing, the rodeo carefully curates their visibility in ways that ultimately affirm the prison’s narrative of moral correction.

Spectating Rehabilitation

Promotional materials frame the rodeo as both a behavioral incentive and a fundraiser for reentry programs (see Fig. 2). Media perpetuate this narrative. In a 2014 interview with *Al Jazeera*, former warden Burl Cain framed the rodeo as integral to rehabilitation, stating, “Today [the inmates] can be king for a day. [...] This is part of the rehabilitative program and part of our reentry is to do this rodeo.”[49]

The physical layout of the event reinforces these themes. Food vendors prominently display signs for affiliated prison support networks and sober living initiatives, embedding messages of redemption into the consumer landscape. The rodeo itself opens with a prayer circle (see Fig. 13), framing the prison as a site of moral transformation. These orchestrated displays construct a spectacle of reform that spectators consume alongside the entertainment.

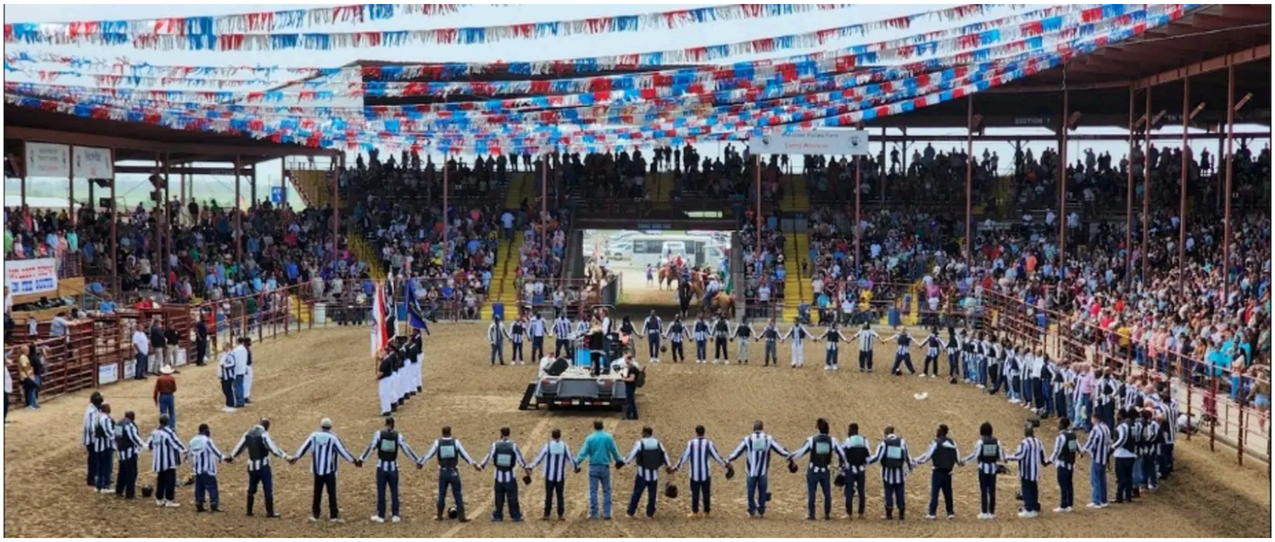

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Figure 13. The prayer circle before the start of the rodeo. Photo by Ronald Tolie, used with permission.

Spectator interviews reveal how deeply this narrative is internalized, with two dominant themes emerging. First, most spectators viewed rodeo participation as a privilege earned through good behavior (n = 8). As one explained, “The rodeo is a great morale booster.… If you’re not in a good position, they don’t allow you to participate. A lot of guys are motivated to behave themselves.” In this framing, visibility is conditional: Only those deemed rehabilitated are permitted to appear before the public, thereby reinforcing the legitimacy of the prison’s internal disciplinary regime.

Second, spectators see the rodeo as a motivating future rehabilitation (n = 8). One explained:

> This lets them know what they’ve missed and that they want to get back to us. So, in order to get back to us, they’re going to have to rehabilitate themselves and say, “Hey, this is not where I want to be. I want to be in the outside world. So, I’m just going to do what’s necessary, not just to get out there, but to stay out there.”

This framing casts the rodeo less as a penal ritual and more as a "free-world" event that inmates must earn the right to join. It simultaneously obscures the carceral nature of the institution and situates the rodeo as a redemptive incentive, encouraging inmates to align their conduct with prison directives. In this way, the rodeo affirms class divisions even as it appears to momentarily collapse them: For spectators, it is entertainment; for inmates, it is evidence of their supposed transformation.

Yet crucially, this rehabilitative spectacle coexists with an unabashed endorsement of retributive justice. Nearly all spectators also articulated explicitly punitive views of imprisonment (n = 7). As one formerly incarcerated respondent put it, "Even though I did 24 years, I did something wrong to be here." Another spectator, blending both rehabilitation and punishment, remarked: "I feel like [the rodeo] is a wonderful program for them to show some of that talent. But some criminals don't need to be in society."

Even when spectators acknowledged systemic injustices or the possibility of wrongful convictions (n = 2), these were treated as exceptions—rare deviations that did not undermine the prison's moral authority. In this logic, rehabilitation and retribution are not opposed but mutually reinforcing: The prison punishes, and thus it earns the right to rehabilitate. The rodeo stages this relationship for public consumption, converting penal power into a redemptive spectacle that legitimizes the institution through its selective, carefully curated display of inmate transformation.

In Doubt of Rehabilitation

In striking contrast to spectators, inmates expressed deep skepticism about the prison's rehabilitative capacity. Like the broader public, most inmates nonetheless endorsed incarceration as a necessary institution (n = 8). One remarked, "If you did the crime… you need to take responsibility. So it's a necessary thing. It's necessary to give repentance."[50]

Yet this endorsement was rarely unconditional. Many inmates drew symbolic boundaries between themselves and what they described as a persistent "delinquent class" (n = 6). As one explained, "I believe that prison is a necessary evil… some people don't want to change, and you see that around here." By distinguishing themselves from others deemed irredeemable, inmates simultaneously affirmed the need for incarceration while positioning themselves as exceptions—individuals who should not bear its harshest retributive consequences.

However, when it came to the prison's rehabilitative function, inmates were largely dismissive (n = 5). They argued that incarceration did little to foster meaningful change, often intensifying rather than remedying criminal tendencies. One observed, "You take a guy, and you lock him up for 20 years; he's either one hundred times better or one thousand times worse." For most, rehabilitation was an individual endeavor divorced from institutional efforts. As one inmate put it succinctly, "It's about how you apply yourself while you're in prison."

Others pointed to the fundamental lack of reintegration opportunities, especially for Angola's many lifers. One inmate lamented:

> They should have an outlet for offenders. You should not have to spend the rest of your life in prison. You know, I've been here 29 years.… So, it should be an outlet. It should be a revolving door. If you decide to come back, then that's fine. But at least say good luck and be a model civilian. And you should be able to stay out there.

These perspectives lay bare a central contradiction: While the rodeo publicly stages the prison as a site of moral transformation, inmates themselves overwhelmingly view such institutional claims as hollow. Their critical insights remain largely invisible to the spectators consuming the event, highlighting how the rodeo manages not just what is seen, but whose interpretations are heard.

Proximity and Critique

These divergent perspectives on rehabilitation illustrate the remarkable cultural resilience of the prison. Both spectators and inmates ultimately endorse incarceration as a legitimate punitive institution, reinforcing the hegemonic US penal ethos. Yet their proximity to the realities of imprisonment profoundly shapes how they interpret the prison as a rehabilitative institution.

For spectators, the rodeo affirms the prison's dual purpose: punishment and rehabilitation. This reflects broader trends in Southern penal institutions, where incarceration is framed not only as a means of punishment but as a necessary moral and social corrective.[51] The rodeo reinforces these views by staging inmates as reformed artisans and performers, temporarily bridging the divide between the free and the confined. That this spectacle occurs at Angola—a prison where over 78% of inmates serve life without parole[52]—underscores the symbolic, rather than practical, nature of this promise. Still, because spectators encounter the prison only through the carefully curated frame of the rodeo, they readily accept a vision of incarceration where retribution and redemption work hand in hand.

By contrast, inmates' closer proximity to the institution's contradictions fosters a more critical stance. They overwhelmingly reject the idea that the prison fosters rehabilitation, emphasizing instead its failures to prepare individuals for reintegration or to promote genuine change. Yet notably, this critique does not translate into a wholesale rejection of the institution itself. Like spectators, inmates largely affirm the prison's punitive role, often by situating themselves apart from others they see as unworthy of reform.

This reveals a paradox central to the cultural durability of the prison: The closer one is to its daily contradictions, the more apparent its failures become, yet this proximity does not necessarily undermine belief in its necessity. Inmates recognize the hollowness of institutional rehabilitation while still accepting the broader legitimacy of punishment. Spectators, insulated from these contradictions by selective visibility, more easily embrace the rehabilitative narrative as evidence of the prison's moral authority. In both cases, the institution's legitimacy is reaffirmed.

Ultimately, the Angola Prison Rodeo exemplifies how selective visibility serves as a potent mechanism of cultural legitimation. Like the 19th-century asylum performances Reiss described, the rodeo does not document rehabilitation as a concrete institutional practice; it theatrically enacts its appearance. By channeling inmates' visibility into narrowly sanctioned performances of reform and craft, the rodeo reassures spectators, silences deeper critique, and sustains the affective and symbolic frameworks that are crucial to maintaining state power.

Violence and Redemption

The rodeo extends the entwined logics of rehabilitation and retribution to its staging of violence. Unlike the bureaucratically obscured harms of solitary confinement, medical neglect, or forced labor—forms of violence that operate out of public view—the Angola Prison Rodeo places corporal risk and injury at the center of its spectacle. This return to visible, bodily punishment appears to break from the "civilizing process" that genealogies of the prison often highlight. Yet paradoxically, this heightened visibility does not threaten the prison's cultural legitimacy. Instead, it is absorbed into the institution's disciplinary narrative, reframed through entertainment and the symbolic language of redemption. Here, spectacular violence coexists with and even bolsters the bureaucratic order of the penal institution.

Violence as Rehabilitation: The Impact of Rodeo Culture

Field observations reveal that spectators did not revel in inmate injuries. Rather than deriving pleasure from harm in the rodeo, they winced, gasped, or groaned when inmates suffered serious falls. While victories were rare—only one inmate successfully completed an eight-second bronco ride, and none succeeded in bull-riding or the Guts and Glory event—spectators erupted in cheers for inmates' near triumphs. These responses suggest that spectators were primarily invested in celebrating inmates' perseverance and resilience, rather than in the spectacle of harm for its own sake.

Interview data reinforces these observations. Many respondents expressed discomfort with witnessing injuries (n = 5), mirroring the sympathetic reactions observed during the events. Some justified the risks by emphasizing the inmates' apparent voluntariness (n = 3), while two explicitly situated the danger within a broader rodeo tradition, where physical risk is an inherent—and culturally valorized—aspect of the sport.

This reading aligns closely with Elizabeth Lawrence's analysis of mainstream rodeo culture, which frames its physical violence as a "badge of conquest of fear and pain." Within this cultural logic, harm is not gratuitous but is recast as evidence of a competitor's mastery over bodily limits and natural forces. As Lawrence observes, rodeo participants "free themselves from their own bodily limitation [...] they are liberated to the highest degree possible from the restrictions of nature itself."[53] The cowboy's mastery over physical danger and natural forces is central to the cultural appeal of the rodeo, transforming risk into a performance of discipline and control.

At the Angola Prison Rodeo, this dynamic is intensified by the heightened risks inmates face. Unlike professional rodeos, Angola's events prioritize luck over skill, exemplified by the "last man standing" format, where inmates must withstand physical harm rather than demonstrate technical expertise. Even in skill-based events, such as bronco riding, inmates lack access to training or practice facilities, further exacerbating their vulnerability. This elevated danger, however, demands an even more pronounced display of discipline than traditional rodeo work: Inmates must demonstrate not only the courage to face unpredictable harm but also the composure to submit to institutional structures that orchestrate their risk. Within the cultural logic of rodeo, such willingness becomes a heightened badge of mastery over one’s own body, over fear, and ultimately over the moral trials the prison claims to administer. Thus, what might appear as raw exploitation is reframed as a testament to inmates’ extraordinary self-control, reinforcing the very ideals of order and personal reform that justify the prison’s authority.

This convergence of the penal institution and the cultural tradition of the rodeo creates a hybrid spectacle that is at once punitive and redemptive. As Rebecca Scofield argues, prison rodeos function as a form of “social salvation,” where enduring physical hardship serves as proof of an inmate’s capacity for reform.[54] Under this logic, violence becomes rehabilitative: It is not understood as excessive coercion, but as a necessary ordeal that reveals moral fortitude and discipline.

Far from undermining the prison’s legitimacy, the rodeo’s highly visible violence reinforces it. By embedding state-sanctioned harm within a cultural form already steeped in narratives of redemption and self-overcoming, the event transforms what might otherwise appear as brutality into evidence of the prison’s corrective mission. The inmate who risks bodily harm does not expose the cruelty of the carceral state; rather, they become a living testament to its moral purpose. In this way, the Angola Prison Rodeo exemplifies how spectacular violence can be reconstituted within existing cultural frameworks to secure the very legitimacy it might otherwise endanger.

For Cash and Glory

As previous findings illustrate, inmates overwhelmingly doubted the prison's rehabilitative function and did not describe their participation in the rodeo in rehabilitative terms. Instead, their motivations were largely instrumental, driven by two central incentives: financial necessity and the opportunity to engage in countervisuality.

Prize money and hobbycraft sales were central motivations for participation. Rodeo winnings and craft revenues provided inmates with means to support themselves and maintain ties beyond the prison walls. As one participant explained, "We don't make much here. It's $0.06 an hour. So this gives you something. It relieves the burden on your family to care for you." Financial pressures thus transformed the rodeo from mere entertainment into an economic lifeline.

Still, those who chose to compete in physically dangerous events rather than sell crafts often emphasized the personal thrill and symbolic stakes of competition. As one inmate recounted, "I've been shell-shocked a few times... Broke my arm in an event, but won it." Despite injuries, he described an almost compulsive draw to the arena: "I started becoming more attracted and addicted to it . . . If you win an event, they cheer . . . it's like an adrenaline rush. I like a challenge." Others echoed this sentiment, highlighting the fulfillment that came from overcoming fear and pain. One noted simply, "They like challenges and danger. That's what they enjoy."

Here, rodeo violence was not framed as institutional exploitation but as a personal proving ground—mirroring dominant rodeo culture, where risk signifies individual mastery and toughness. Importantly, inmates distinguished this type of violence from the bureaucratic, impersonal harms they routinely criticized in prison life, such as isolation or medical neglect. Within the cultural logic of rodeo, even state-organized bodily risk could be reimagined as voluntary, identity-affirming, and meaningful.

Field observations reinforced these narratives. Inmates often celebrated small victories with theatrical gestures, like climbing the stadium fence to salute the cheering crowd. Such moments offered more than economic gain: They provided a stage for inmates to challenge their stigmatized identities, stepping into the culturally valorized role of the cowboy.

Yet this assertion of agency was deeply constrained by the institutional structure that made such participation necessary. Several inmates described starting in the arena for prize money, then shifting to craft sales once they secured access to materials through privileged prison jobs (n = 4). As one hobbycraft vendor noted, “If I lose my job, I’ll probably be back out there [competing in rodeo].” Those working on Angola’s Farm Line or in other less favored assignments often lacked such access, leaving dangerous rodeo participation as one of the only routes to modest financial support or public interaction. In this way, the prison transformed economic deprivation and social marginalization into a controlled spectacle of consent. What appeared as freely chosen risk was often a carefully structured decision under the shadow of institutional power and an internal labor hierarchy. By presenting this participation as voluntary, the rodeo obscured the coercive context shaping inmates’ choices and recast compliance and bodily risk as personal agency.

Moreover, even as inmates attempted to assert some form of countervisuality in these rodeo performances, the broader spectacle reabsorbed their individual agency into the legitimating logic of the prison. Spectators did not see these performances as critiques of incarceration or expressions of resistance. Instead, they interpreted them as evidence of the prison’s rehabilitative success. In this sense, the spectacle neutralized the countervisual message.

Staging Violence, Concealing Power

Taken together, these findings show how spectacular violence is transformed into an affirmation of penal order. Spectators and inmates alike did not interpret rodeo injuries as state-inflicted violence. Instead, risk was framed through familiar cultural narratives that rendered it voluntary, redemptive, and even necessary. For spectators, the rodeo's dangers did not appear to violate the prison's moral purpose. On the contrary, the event harmonized with broader cultural scripts that blended punishment with moral uplift. As interviews revealed, spectators often saw inmates' willingness to compete—and endure harm—as evidence of both individual reform and the prison's successful guidance.

This cultural rationalization challenges Schrift's argument that spectators attend primarily to witness inmate suffering as dark tourists. In this study, spectators frequently expressed discomfort with visible harm but quickly reframed it through the rodeo's logic, where risk signals courage and moral worth. Injuries did not challenge the institution's legitimacy; they became markers of inmates' moral rehabilitation, reinforcing the prison's disciplinary authority.

For inmates, too, the cultural logic of rodeo structured how they made sense of the event. Rather than viewing the rodeo as a mechanism of institutional control, they described it as a source of financial support, personal excitement, and public recognition—a "challenge," a chance to display strength and skill before an engaged audience. Within these constraints, inmates framed their participation as an act of agency.

Yet even these attempts at countervisuality—where inmates sought to reclaim a visible, dignified identity—were ultimately reabsorbed into the prison's legitimating framework. As Lawrence observes, "the surrounding and supporting society exerts a profoundly influential force in the ritual itself."[55] Inmates' performances of discipline and endurance, while deeply meaningful to them, were read by spectators not as challenges to their carceral status, but as evidence of successful rehabilitation. In this way, the rodeo did not merely showcase the prison's control over inmate bodies, as Gould suggests,[56] but also aligned that control with cultural expectations of compassion and reform—portraying incarceration itself as a humanitarian penal practice.

Further complicating this legitimating spectacle are the event's racial dynamics. While the rodeo features racially diverse participants and audiences, the majority of inmate competitors are Black, while most spectators are white. This pattern echoes longstanding carceral logics in which Black suffering is rendered culturally acceptable. As Gillespie argues, cultural narratives around Blackness and delinquency shape public perceptions of the rodeo, reinforcing a racialized framework in which harm against Black bodies is more easily justified.[57] In this context, the rodeo's violence is legitimized through two interwoven dynamics: the cultural logic of rodeo, which frames physical endurance as proof of moral redemption, and the racialized logic of punishment, which normalizes Black suffering within the carceral state.

By embedding the rodeo within narratives of courage and redemption drawn from Southern rodeo traditions and by tapping into racialized penal scripts, the prison reframes spectacular violence as a natural extension of its corrective mission. In doing so, it legitimizes the rodeo as a plausible penal practice and fortifies its own moral authority. The risks and injuries on display become not signs of institutional failure, but of its rehabilitative promise. In this way, the prison's disciplinary power is sustained not just by bureaucratic routine or overt coercion, but by its deep entanglement with widely held cultural logics that normalize and justify its practices.

Synopticism and Penal Authority

The Angola Prison Rodeo illustrates how selective visibility enables the prison to thrive not only as a cultural symbol but also as a powerful disciplinary institution. The rodeo does more than bolster the prison's moral legitimacy; by shaping how punishment is publicly seen and understood, it actively expands the institution's reach. Spectators become more than passive onlookers. Through their collective gaze and financial participation, they are drawn into sustaining and extending the prison's power.

The Public as Synopticon: Strengthening Institutional Power

As David Garland observes, penal rituals such as public executions, sentencing hearings, etc. work on two levels: they operate as Durkheimian ceremonies that reaffirm shared moral values around crime and discipline, while also serving as Foucauldian instruments that normalize state authority and make carceral power appear both necessary and natural.[58] In *Escape to Prison*, Michael Welch extends this insight to the realm of penal tourism, arguing that visits to carceral sites are not merely about satisfying curiosity. Instead, they draw the public into performative rituals that cultivate cultural consensus around punishment and deepen support for the very institutions that administer it.

Yet at Angola, this process of consent and complicity begins long before spectators enter the prison grounds via synoptic advertising. Where Foucault's panopticism describes the few watching the many to enforce discipline, Thomas Mathiesen asserts that in a media-saturated society, the many watch the few.[59] This mass-mediated gaze does not disrupt institutional power but reinforces it, as authorities carefully curate what is visible to manufacture legitimacy and secure compliance. The synopticon does not replace the panopticon; it operates alongside it, embedding surveillance and discipline within popular culture and everyday life.[60]

The Angola Prison Rodeo exemplifies this synoptic mechanism. Through pervasive advertising and cultural marketing, the rodeo shapes public perceptions of the prison well before visitors arrive, portraying Angola as both a morally necessary institution and a site of personal transformation. Once inside, spectators encounter a choreographed landscape that recasts violence as entertainment and moral trial, ensuring what they see conforms to dominant narratives of rehabilitation, grit, and social order.

Critically, this managed visibility does more than produce ideological consent; it has immediate material effects. Unlike typical penal tours of abandoned sites, the Angola Rodeo takes place within a functioning prison economy. Revenues from tickets, concessions, and hobbycraft purchases directly support inmate programs that expand the institution's disciplinary capacity. Spectators thus become not only cultural consumers of the prison's spectacle but also financial underwriters of its ongoing operations.

In this way, the Angola Prison Rodeo demonstrates how modern punishment is reproduced through intertwined cultural and economic mechanisms. It fuses Gramscian cultural consent with Foucauldian disciplinary power that extends its reach through managed visibility and public participation. By inviting the public to watch, endorse, and materially sustain its operations, the rodeo does not merely uphold the prison's authority; it deepens and entrenches it, showing how contemporary punishment is secured as much through cultural allure and economic flows as through overt force.

The Synoptic Gaze and Inmate Compliance

The synopticon at the prison rodeo also functions as a direct instrument of discipline, extending carceral power through the public's gaze. As surveillance studies have long argued, disciplinary power is diffuse; it does not end at institutional walls but radiates outward, incorporating social observers into its machinery.[61] At Angola, this diffusion is evident in how the prison merges its internal panoptic surveillance of inmates with the synoptic surveillance of the public.

Inmates actively seek out this public gaze. They pursue it as a way to earn money through rodeo participation or hobbycraft sales, and as a rare chance to present themselves beyond the narrow identity of "offender"—even though these self-presentations are ultimately recoded by the institution to reinforce its legitimacy. Crucially, however, access to the synoptic gaze is contingent on prior compliance with the prison's disciplinary expectations. As several inmates emphasized (n = 5), participation in the rodeo is not a right but a privilege earned through demonstrated good behavior: "We have to work to earn it," one noted.

This structure is deeply stratified. Trustee inmates—those who most reliably conform to prison regulations—gain the broadest access to spectators. They move with relative freedom, engage directly with visitors, market their crafts, and reap economic and social rewards from synoptic exposure. By contrast, big-stripe inmates in more restrictive classifications are positioned behind fences, permitted only limited participation with far fewer chances to benefit from the public gaze and sell their goods. In this way, the synoptic gaze is not passive observation; it operates as a disciplinary incentive, selectively granted to those who first submit to the prison's panoptic authority.

Through this process, the public gaze becomes an instrument of carceral control. By tying access to spectators—and the economic and symbolic benefits this brings—to prior obedience, the prison effectively enlists the public in its disciplinary project. The Angola Prison Rodeo does not merely display the prison to society; it makes society an active participant in governing the incarcerated. Spectatorship itself becomes a tool that legitimizes, sustains, and materially strengthens the prison's authority, weaving everyday people into the ongoing enforcement of institutional discipline.

Penal Tour, Penal Ritual, Penal Practice

Taken together, these findings show how the Angola Prison Rodeo relies on carefully orchestrated acts of selective visibility to secure and expand the prison's power. Selective visibility is a defining feature of contemporary punishment culture: Prisons highlight certain aspects of their operations while obscuring others, shaping public understanding and legitimating incarceration. This process embeds the prison within the cultural realm, thereby making imprisonment appear both natural and beneficial, a mechanism that can be understood through Gramsci's concept of "common sense." These orchestrations do more than mold beliefs: They function as technologies of social control, a framework supported by Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power. This extends the prison's disciplinary reach by recruiting the public to watch, fund, and participate in its operations. Unlike conventional penal tourism, which typically focuses on historical or decommissioned sites, the Angola Rodeo offers direct access to a functioning prison. In this way, it aligns with active prison tours, which also rely on selective visibility within the active prison site. Yet, where standard active tours exert institutional control through the micromanagement of spectators' interaction with inmates, the rodeo takes a critical step further. Instead of relying on this direct oversight from prison personnel, it employs a massively staged spectacle to manage visibility. The framing of the event as entertainment and rehabilitation performs the function of control for the prison, actively governing what is revealed and what is concealed. This strategic orchestration is achieved by fusing vivid spectacles of bodily risk with familiar narratives of rodeo valor and longstanding racialized ideas of punishment. It transforms what might otherwise be seen as coercive state violence into a culturally resonant performance of rehabilitation and moral order. Rather than exposing the contradictions of mass incarceration, the spectacle conceals them, rendering punishment ordinary, entertaining, and culturally resonant.

This study builds on existing scholarship but also advances it in key ways. As Gould noted, the rodeo does affirm the prison's authority[62]; as Gillespie noted, it does so by drawing on the racialized history of incarceration.[63] However, this study suggests that the rodeo's legitimacy is not rooted primarily in overt, spectacular violence, as Schrift argued.[64] While the event draws on racial scripts that legitimate carceral power, it does so by embedding violence within a rehabilitative, culturally familiar framework of rodeo competition. This framing normalizes inmate harm, not as a rupture in penal order, but as evidence of its moral purpose. More critically, this study reveals that the rodeo does not merely produce cultural narratives—it materially expands the prison's disciplinary apparatus. Through spectators' financial investments and the synoptic gaze, the public becomes directly entangled in the carceral project, underwriting and socially enforcing its authority.

Taken together, these insights show how the Angola Prison Rodeo exemplifies the modern prison's capacity to fortify itself through both Gramscian cultural consent and Foucauldian discipline. By managing what is seen and how it is understood, the rodeo embeds incarceration within everyday moral and cultural frameworks, while simultaneously deepening the reach of carceral power. By tracing how selective visibility, racial scripts, public investment, and diffuse surveillance intersect, this study demonstrates that penal power is not merely maintained but actively enlarged. The Angola Prison Rodeo thus reveals how contemporary punishment operates not only through hidden bureaucratic mechanisms, but also through public rituals that make carceral authority appear natural, redemptive, and indispensable.

Conclusion

This study acknowledges several limitations that shape its findings. First, while the spectators interviewed here overwhelmingly viewed the rodeo as a positive or benign event, this is not a universal cultural interpretation. Journalistic accounts have compared the Angola Prison Rodeo to exploitative gladiatorial combat, with critics calling it "warped" and "inhumane."[65] Such critiques reveal that the rodeo's legitimizing effects are not uncontested, pointing to important sites of cultural resistance that warrant further exploration. Nonetheless, the rodeo's capacity to generate revenue and reinforce disciplinary control ensures its endurance, even amid some public objection.

Second, this study focuses exclusively on inmates who gained institutional approval to participate in the rodeo—whether through direct competition or hobbycraft sales—thus representing a privileged subset of Angola's incarcerated population. Many others, excluded by disciplinary status, security classification, or personal choice, may view the rodeo not as an opportunity but as an inaccessible privilege or even a coercive spectacle. By analyzing the perspectives of only those permitted to engage, this study captures a key mechanism of discipline while highlighting the need for future research on non-participating inmates, whose perspectives may complicate or challenge these findings.

Beyond the Angola Prison Rodeo, broader shifts in mass media continue to reshape the visibility of the prison. The rodeo allows an unprecedented level of visibility with incarcerated individuals, but reality-based media like *Scared Straight!*[66]or *Lockup*[67]has intensified existent cultural fascination with media portrayals of punishment.[68] The popularity of recent releases like Netflix's *Unlocked: A Jail Experiment* [69] illustrates how synoptic media continues to fuel public interest in crime and punishment. These portrayals do more than satisfy public curiosity: They teach societal norms, extend carceral power into civilian life, and encourage incarcerated individuals to regulate their own behavior in anticipation of external scrutiny. Meanwhile, vast dimensions of prison life remain strategically hidden from view, which helps sustain the cultural legitimacy of the prison via mass media.

The Angola Prison Rodeo thus serves as a revealing case study for how selective visibility, cultural scripts, and the synoptic mechanism work together to naturalize incarceration. This research shows how carefully curated spectacles can anchor prisons more deeply in the cultural imagination. Drawing on Gramsci, it highlights how penal rituals like the rodeo manufacture cultural “common sense,” making incarceration appear morally necessary and inevitable. At the same time, following Foucault, it reveals how these rituals extend disciplinary power beyond prison walls, recruiting the public as financial supporters and informal overseers of the carceral state.

By tracing these intersections of spectacle, surveillance, and social control, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how penal power is not merely maintained but actively enlarged. The Angola Prison Rodeo does more than reflect the authority of the prison—it amplifies it, ensuring that incarceration persists not only as a legal institution but as a vital cultural practice, woven into the fabric of life in the US.

Notes

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44. During the October data collection period, a formerly incarcerated respondent took a strong interest in the project and voluntarily guided me through the fairgrounds for three hours before the rodeo. He provided detailed explanations of both the prison and the rodeo, offering valuable insights from his perspective as a former inmate and current spectator. Additionally, he helped mitigate common challenges in ethnographic research, such as respondent suspicion and mistrust, by recruiting several inmates he

knew from his time in prison. He introduced me to a broad cross section of inmates involved in various aspects of the rodeo. Six of the interviewed inmates were hobbycraft participants, four of whom held trustee status, allowing them to interact directly with spectators, while two were big-stripe inmates selling their crafts behind a chain-link enclosure. One respondent was actively competing in rodeo events during the interview, and half of the total respondents (n = 4) had previously participated in rodeo events. Additionally, one inmate was not involved in the rodeo or hobbycraft but worked with the Prisoners Assisting Warrior Service (PAWS) program, training service dogs for veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder. This study was greatly enriched by the contributions of this formerly incarcerated respondent. ↩

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Generationality, Desirability, and Redemption: How Aziz Ansari and Hasan Minhaj Articulate New Desi Masculinities in Stand-Up Comedy

by Madhavi Reddi and Margaret E Foster | Issue 14.2 (Fall 2025)

ABSTRACT Desi creators in US culture continue to work within—and against—the white gaze, which divides them into sexless sidekicks or threatening terrorists. Two comedians who have defied these stereotypes and built their own expressions of Desi masculinity are Aziz Ansari and Hasan Minhaj. Ansari's comedic persona is informed by his work in film and television, while Minhaj's comedic persona is situated within his work on political news satire. While Ansari is known for his "funny cute" persona, Minhaj portrays himself as a steady family man. Despite these contrasting groundings in comedy, they are comparable in their shared use of the stand-up genre to articulate their experiences as South Asian Americans. In this article we explore the ways in which Minhaj and Ansari use humor to construct their identities as second-generation South Asian Americans—separating themselves from orientalizing white narratives and the model minority myth that have long stereotyped South Asians in American entertainment media. We contend that they maintain cultural citizenship by articulating a new Desi masculinity that stands the test of controversy, ultimately granting them redemption by mainstream American audiences.

KEYWORDS South Asian Americans, comedy, masculinity, popular culture

Introduction

It's a cloudy evening in Brooklyn, New York. Comedian Aziz Ansari waits for his turn to walk on stage. He cracks the door open to a cheering crowd and confidently walks onto the dais. Wearing a Metallica t-shirt and a casual pair of jeans, he sits on a single stool in the middle of the stage and begins his routine:

> I was walking around the other day, and this guy, uh, came up to me on the street, and he was like, uh, "Hey, man. Love the Netflix show!" And I was like, "Oh, thanks so much." He was like, "Yeah, yeah, I really liked the episode you did on Supreme!" I was like, "What? I didn't do no episode on Supreme." And then I quickly realized he's talking about Hasan Minhaj. Patriot Act. Different show. Different guy. And he felt horrible, right? He immediately realized his mistake, and he was trying to buy it back. He was like, "Oh, no, no, Aziz, right?" I was like, "Yeah, yeah. That's me." "Master of None!" "Yeah, yeah. That's me." "Parks and Rec." "Yeah, yeah. That's me." "Treat yo' self." "Yeah, yeah. That's me." "And, uh, you had that whole thing last year, sexual misconduct?" "No, no, no, no, no! That was Hasan."[1]

In a predominantly white American media landscape, stand-up comedy is an important site of identity construction. This is especially true for minoritized groups, such as Asian Americans, which include people from the Indian subcontinent. One type of identity that is constructed through comedy is Desi masculinity.[2] "Desi" refers to anyone from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and other countries marked as South Asian. Like other marginalized groups, Desi men like Aziz Ansari and Hasan Minhaj are compelled to work against perceptions of interchangeability. Even though the two men are very different in their looks and comedian personas, they are viewed as one and the same because of their racial markers under the umbrella of Desi masculinity. This essentializes people of color by reducing them to stereotypes.[3]

Dominant portrayals of Desi masculinity tend to be defined against both the specter of the post-9/11 terrorist and as embodying a "lack of sexual appeal."[4] Na theorizes the ways in which Desi masculinity "has been culturally produced in media and cultural discourse, rather than how Desis have practiced their own masculinity."[5] Desi creators continue to work within—and against—the white gaze, which divides them into sexless sidekicks or threatening terrorists.

Two comedians who have defied these stereotypes and built their own expressions of Desi masculinity are Aziz Ansari and Hasan Minhaj. Ansari's comedic persona is informed by his dramatic work, while Minhaj's comedic persona is situated within his work on political news satire. While Ansari is known for his "funny cute" persona,[6] Minhaj portrays himself as a steady family man. Despite these contrasting groundings in comedy, they are comparable in their shared use of the stand-up genre to articulate their experiences as South Asian Americans, specifically straight, cisgender Indian American Muslim men. In doing so, they both use comedy to seek cultural acceptance, and specifically cultural citizenship[7] even as they use charged humor[8] to critique white supremacy.

However, both Minhaj and Ansari have also faced offstage scandals.In 2018, Ansari was accused of sexual misconduct connected to the ongoing #MeToo hashtag activism campaign; in 2023, Minhaj was accused of embellishing his onstage personal anecdotes to the point of "lying" about his experiences with racism. In both cases, each scandal seemingly disrupted the comedian's onstage persona: Ansari's loveable anti-womanizer playboy and Minhaj's authoritative truth-telling. While Minhaj and Ansari both navigate stereotypes and the politics of Desi masculinity, their divergence becomes apparent when we examine how their frontstage persona intersects with their expressions of generational identity and desirability, and their navigation of backstage scandal. We use the terms "frontstage" and "backstage" following Erving Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor, which describes the social roles individuals take on and perform for specific audiences as their "fronts," contrasted with the more relaxed "backstage" away from that audience. [9] Each comedian's successful comeback tour after facing temporary "cancellation" suggests that cultural citizenship can be achieved by artists belonging to minoritized groups via a "redemption arc." In comparing the two comedians' frontstage identities with their backstage scandals, this analysis examines how comedy becomes a space for both constructing and disrupting authentic South Asian American second-generation identity, particularly in relation to the politics of Desi masculinity and the East Asian American “Model Man.”[10]

Stereotypes of Desi Masculinity

Comedians of minoritized backgrounds often seek cultural acceptance through their comedy: The ability to make and receive a joke about oneself and one’s position in society is a way of achieving subjecthood.[11] As Samah Choudhury observes, humor is “an avenue of social access and cultural citizenship within the contemporary secular imaginary of the United States.”[12] Regardless of one’s legal status in the US, cultural citizenship refers to a more abstract sense of belonging there, adequately assimilating to social customs and cultural practices. Choudhury discusses how laughing at oneself and having a sense of humor is a valuable personality trait that ultimately establishes American subjecthood by giving comedians the power to critique societal hierarchies, while still being confined to them. Aziz Ansari and Hasan Minhaj each laugh at themselves onstage.

Ansari and Minhaj also both use “charged humor,” that is, humor that is intentionally produced to challenge “social inequality and cultural exclusion.”[13] The main target of their jokes is white supremacy and the everyday racism that they face as second-generation South Asian Americans. They build these personas against the backdrop of a long history of racialized stereotypes in American media. Most often, the Brown body has been articulated in media and public discourse as a threat in the post-9/11 era.[14] Desi men are articulated against the specter of Muslim terrorists.

Comedians have sought to disrupt this stereotype in dramatic portrayals. One example is *Harold and Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay*, which Shilpa Davé describes as “not just an alternative narrative but also one that reinvents the fear and terror embodied by brown and yellow bodies and through the use of comedy proves that brown and yellow bodies can be harmless, normal, and patriotic."[15] Instead of evil terrorist masterminds, Brown men can also be lovable, innocent stoners.

On the flip side, Asian American men have long been portrayed in an emasculated way—a sidekick to the hypermasculine white main character and, implicitly, a foil to the hypersexualized stereotype of Black men. South Asian American characters are played for comedic relief through their exaggerated accent or inability to "get the girl." For example, Raj from *Big Bang Theory* is characterized as a "geek" and is shown in episode after episode to be inept with women. Apu from *The Simpsons*, though voiced by white actor Hank Azaria, has gone down in history for his accent—setting the stage for future actors being asked to perform "with an accent," even if they are second-generation and speak with an American accent.

These portrayals, as either threat or comic relief, have precluded Desi and Asian men from being fully realized as cultural citizens of America, despite their legal status. Due to unassimilable differences such as physical appearance, accent, or customs—indicators of cultural citizenship—they are never able to be fully considered "American."[16] Regardless of whether the character is a first-generation or second-generation South Asian American (see below) or whether they have an American passport, they have all been essentialized within the parameters of the Brown threat or comedic relief stereotype.

All stereotypes are ultimately about reduction to immutable traits, which signal interchangeability: Which actor portrays a Muslim terrorist is beside the point, so long as the actor has a Brown body. However, Desi men in entertainment work against this interchangeability by articulating their own pathways to cultural citizenship and American individualism.

Ansari and Minhaj Navigate Interchangeability

Comedy is one way to overcome these obstacles and subvert stereotypes about racialized masculinity. Aziz Ansari and Hasan Minhaj work against these stereotypes in their stand-up sets: Each comedian centers his daily life as an Indian American Muslim man. Both comedians curate their subjecthood as Brown men, particularly in relation to white women. Yet while Ansari is known for joking about singledom, dating mishaps, and his interpersonal conversations, Minhaj's comedy frequently veers into the explicitly political, poking fun at politicians, world leaders, and policy platforms. In this section, we discuss how these two comedians successfully cultivate their individual comedic personas and resist the interchangeability that results from stereotypes.

Aziz Ansari was one of the first Desi celebrities to achieve mainstream fame in the US. Ansari is a second-generation South Asian American, born in South Carolina to Tamil Muslim parents; he himself identifies as atheist.[17] Ansari paved the way for Desi men in American comedy and shaped viewer expectations of mainstream Desi masculinity in the late 2000s and early 2010s. Ansari is known for his stand-up comedy, which incorporates feminist humor about dating and gender relations, and for his role as Tom Haverford on the hit NBC comedy *Parks and Recreation* (2009–2015). After *Parks and Rec*, Ansari created and starred in the dramedy *Master of None* (2015–2021) on Netflix. The show was critically praised for challenging stereotypical representations of Desi men.[18] For example, while Desi men are stereotyped as sexless, the opening scene of *Master of None* includes Ansari's character Dev in the act of having sex, furthermore, with a white woman.

Hasan Minhaj is also a second-generation Indian American of Muslim descent. Minhaj grew up in Davis, California, where he began doing stand-up comedy in college. While working on his stand-up, he was hired as a *Daily Show* correspondent by Jon Stewart in 2014.[19] Unlike Ansari's fictional personas, Minhaj gained fame for his political commentary, including being the first Indian American Muslim featured speaker at a White House Correspondents' Dinner.[20] After leaving the *Daily Show*, Minhaj began hosting *Patriot Act*, a weekly Netflix political satire comedy that ran from 2018–2020.[21] He also performed stand-up. Minhaj is known for his cutting political insights and refusal to mute aspects of his identity for a white audience, waiting instead for them to "catch up."[22] For example, he is well known for popularizing the Hindi phrase "log kya kahenge" ("what will people say?") and dropping uncontextualized references to Bollywood movie titles, songs, and dialogues.

Onstage, Ansari and Minhaj each invoke the other's comedy as a way of solidifying their own, separate personas. Thus, they define themselves against one another (as well as their other colleagues of South Asian descent) while invoking their surface similarities. In *The King's Jester*, Minhaj screens a photo of Kumail Nanjiani, a Pakistani-American actor. In the photo, Nanjiani shows off his muscular body, a direct foil to the historically emasculated portrayal of Asian men in American media. Looking at the photo, Minhaj laments, "Fuck you, Kumail! How dare you show white people what we could look like! That's why I love Aziz . . . he set the bar right where it should be, do you understand? Five foot two, built like a laddu, he's eating pasta all day, right?"[23] Minhaj proceeds to mockingly jump around the stage, imitating Ansari's energetic and childish stage persona, while the audience erupts into laughter. Through this comparison, Minhaj presents himself as occupying a space between Nanjiani's hypermasculine standard (which conforms to white virility) and Ansari's softer Desi standard. More importantly, the sequence highlights the three men as vastly different from each other, despite all being South Asian American men of a Muslim background. By creating new comparisons of masculinity, Minhaj moves away from invoking exclusively the white standard as an idealized vision of manhood—even as he acknowledges the white gaze as part of the larger context of masculine ideals.

Meanwhile, Ansari makes multiple jokes about the constructed interchangeability between himself and his peers in the industry. While acknowledging his sexual misconduct controversy in *Right Now*, Ansari recounts a time when a passerby confused him for Minhaj. He uses the confusion to set up a joke about framing Minhaj for the sexual misconduct he, Ansari, was accused of in 2017 (quoted in full at the beginning of our paper). Through the joke, Ansari illustrates ironically how he could use their interchangeability to his advantage, but of course, does not do so. In invoking each other's differences, Minhaj and Ansari create dimensions to the idea of Desi masculinity—all while poking fun at the interchangeability that some white audiences seem to find between them.

This connects back to the theoretical frameworks around "taking a joke" as a means of achieving cultural citizenship and acceptance.[24] While Ansari and Minhaj cite their own intertextualities with each other as a means of articulating their own identities, they always do it as a means of self and community empowerment; the joke is the indignity of being interchangeable as the only two Desi comedians to achieve mainstream fame. This tactic has a double utility: in joking about their interchangeability, Minhaj and Ansari both establish their own personal brands and subvert the expectations of broad similarity that groups people in the "Other" category together. In other words, while Minhaj and Ansari both have their personal brands, they also subvert stereotypes by asserting their own individualities. Both comedians are also able to use those negative stereotypes to empower themselves and elevate one another's comedy. Furthermore, they are able to do this in a way that not only establishes cultural citizenship, but also reshapes the way America views South Asian men in terms of desirability.

Desi Masculinity and Desirability

Sexual and romantic desirability has always been linked to race in the US. Within a heterosexual dating market, white men have traditionally been seen as the most desirable for factors rooted in privilege. Black men, by contrast, are framed as hypersexual. Asian men have been emasculated, as previously discussed. Ali Na signals how humor can be used to make up for unattractiveness in a white dating environment—what she calls "funny *sexy*," a persona that is normatively white and can render a physically unattractive white man as desirable due to his wit and ability to take a joke.[25] In a society where desirability has been racially ranked, it is useful to think about how Ansari and Minhaj cultivate a desirable persona on stage.

South Asian American men have long been the butt of the joke (e.g., Apu); yet the reversal of roles for Ansari and Minhaj is located in who is the object of the joke. Through their use of charged humor, Ansari and Minhaj both maneuver their audiences to laugh not at their own failed attempts to adhere to white sexual norms, but at the fact of the white norms themselves. In other words, while Asian American men were previously laughed *at*, now they are laughed *with*. Ansari and Minhaj both cultivate personas focused on punching up humor, reversing their traditional roles. Further, because hegemonic masculinity is affirmed through sexuality, dating white women (the ultimate object of sexual desire under white supremacy) is often understood as one way Desi men can overcome emasculation stereotypes.[26]

The fact that these men cultivate sexual desirability at all is a means of disrupting the cultural order—the normative power structures that govern how comedy and culture are produced and circulated, and how they maintain social structures. According to Mary Douglas, when things turn up in the wrong order, this disrupts culture.[27] Minhaj and Ansari make such a disruption via their punching up.

In the context of desirability, they also disrupt the cultural order by presenting as Desi men who are sexually appealing to white women. This Brown threat has often been understood as a threat against white women's sexuality, following in a long tradition of "sexualization of politics"[28] around racial minorities in the United States.[29] Indeed, white women have always been weaponized by white men against men of color in order to maintain social hierarchies. These fears and actions reflect white racial anxieties around the erosion of racial difference—and therefore white supremacy—through interracial sex and childrearing.[30] In this view, men of color dating white women threatens the future of the white race.

Kelly H. Chong and Nadia Y. Kim show how the hierarchy of desirability is shifting for Asian American men through the emergence of what they call "The Model Man," a hybrid masculinity that blends model minority traits such as education, financial stability, and good behavior with elements of hegemonic white masculinity.[31] Through interviews with second-generation East Asian American men (who have historically been subject to similar stereotypes of emasculation as South Asian men), they find that this new "Model Man" becomes particularly attractive to white women who like that men of Asian background are less "obnoxious"[32] than their white counterparts and still possess significant social and economic capital. In other words, for white women, being smart but not overconfident is the new sexy. By contrast, Asian women have a more critical view of Asian masculinity given that they associate Asian men with an older iteration of masculinity expressed by their fathers and grandfathers.[33] The Model Man is a new generational figure, as will be discussed in the next section.

As Chong and Kim point out, this Model Man aligns in many ways with what Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Michael A. Messner describe as the "New Man," a nurturing, egalitarian, and emotionally expressive middle-class male ideal.[34] Yet, as Crystal Parikh warns, these alternative articulations of Asian American masculinity also risk reinforcing patriarchal hierarchies by substituting Asian men into a pre-existing system of masculine privilege rather than resisting it.[35] In the context of comedy, it is then up to comedians to present their articulation of desirable masculinity with some attention to these shifting dynamics.

Ansari and Minhaj cultivate sexual desirability through very different self-presentation styles. Na offered a theory of Ansari's 2010s comedy brand as animating a "funny cute" persona: rather than funny *sexy*, which is a white masculine mode of humor, Ansari performed funny *cute*.[36] Sianne Ngai identifiescuteness as an aesthetic identifiable by its soft malleability, childishness, and femininity.[37] Drawing on Ngai's work, Na argues that these vulnerable qualities of cuteness were generally filtered through Ansari's characters' "defunct sexuality." (A notable example is Tom Haverford on *Parks and Recreation*.) Ansari's characters, and his onstage presence, is funny because of his persona's clumsy and failed sexuality—an inability to get dates, a childish affect. Humor comes from what Na calls an "inelasticity of essence," whereby the joke is that Ansari cannot access the "white privileged form of masculinity." Instead, his ineptitude is enmeshed with his racial identity.[38] The fact that Ansari can't access the white male standard of desirability softens what would otherwise be a clear articulation of the sexual threat of his Brownness.

However, Ansari himself jokes in *Buried Alive* about using sex with white women as a means of challenging white supremacy:

> If you're opposed to interracial relationships, guess what? I'm fucking white girls, there's nothing you can do about it. Any time I have sex with a white girl, I think about those people for a few pumps and it's such a great feeling.[39]

The political point of the importance of interracial relationships hits hard; yet his otherwise sexually clumsy persona softens the threat. Ansari is physically small, childish in his jokes, and overall adorable—which, per Ngai and Na, always suggests nonthreatening stature.[40] Na observes that Ansari's cuteness simultaneously elicited "endearment and suspicion" from his audience, which she further characterized as “adoration as a thin veil to practices of superiority.”[41] In other words, Ansari’s persona can be indexed to a long history of the emasculation of Asian men in American media for the comfort of white audiences.

By contrast, Hasan Minhaj gets closer to the “funny sexy” persona. Yet he also undoes the potential threat of his sexuality through his marriage to Dr. Beena Patel, a second-generation Indian American like him. Due to his happily married status, he does not pose a symbolic threat to white cultural order via the potential of an interracial relationship. Minhaj also makes jokes in his stand-up about interracial sex, and specifically his encounters with white women; yet these encounters are firmly in the past. As a married patriarch, Minhaj is unavailable and therefore unthreatening to current white male bachelors in his strong family man persona. Additionally, Minhaj’s marriage status, which softens his sexual threat, allows him to be sharper in other areas of self-presentation. His jokes are politically aggressive—not grounded in personal romantic ventures, but clearly couched in the larger context of post-9/11 politics.

In his comedy, Minhaj is always seen in casual attire; he uses a stool in *Homecoming King* and frequently highlights his secure marriage. While he regales the audience with tales of dating white women in the past, these stories are always tempered by the implicit presence of his current wife, whom he hypes up onstage–frequently mentioning that she has a PhD vis-à-vis his own career as a comedian.[42] The bulk of *The King’s Jester* is an ode to fatherhood, eliciting frequent “awwws” from the audience as he reinforces the importance of family and his role as a father. The stand-up special opens with a comedic but touching story about his fertility issues. Throughout the show, Minhaj ties everything back to his daughter, regardless of whether he talks about hate mail, the Saudi government, or venture capitalism.

Minhaj’s secure status as a patriarch, we argue, is key to his authority onstage and his ability to perform Desi masculinity beyond the “funny cute.” Ansari elicits a protective response from his audience; Minhaj is the protector of his family. Minhaj is not soft, with smoothed edges; his humor verges on the vulgar, weaving serious accusations of racism and structural political critique. Minhaj breaks the dialectic between audience and performer needed to construct the funny cute articulation of Desi masculinity. Instead, Minhaj maintains power within the white masculine paradigm of power over information, bolstered by his position as a family patriarch. If anything, Minhaj treats the audience with a veil of superiority; he never invites the audience to look down on him, even as he makes jokes about himself. Instead, he waits for his audience to catch up to him.

This question of desirability as power reaches the core of stereotypes about the other. Desirability is in fact one way to articulate differentiation of the other, via fetishization. Stuart Hall offers the example of Saartje Baartman, whose recasting as the “Hottentot Venus” in the early 1800s reduced her to mere body parts, flattening her personhood to her sexuality—which was appended to her race as a Black woman in Europe at the height of colonization. Fetishism can be a means of representing a taboo because it involves a tongue-in-cheek disavowal, that is, a “strategy by means of which a powerful fascination or desire is both *indulged* and at the same time *denied*.”[43] This disavowal becomes a way for taboo topics, like sexuality, to be both represented but *not represented* at the same time.

Crucially, this description of the taboo is not so different from Na’s articulation of Desi masculinity: how Desi men have been narrated, as opposed to how they have articulated their own self-representations of gender. Sexuality as it exists in a colonial and white supremacist matrix of heterosexuality will always be differentiated by race (of both the desirer and the desired). Today’s Desi comedians have more latitude than their predecessors, even as they remain dependent on audience revenue—and, therefore, on maintaining a desirable persona for their audiences.

Ansari and Minhaj do not shy away from their otherness relative to a white media landscape, and they use their positionality to “punch up” and disrupt the cultural order that might otherwise fetishize them, reducing their bodies to their sexuality or their affable asexuality. Ultimately, the fetish gaze is always about maintaining power. Ansari displaces this power, accepting it but putting his own spin on it via the funny cute; he rejects the white gaze and reclaims the sexless stereotype. Minhaj, on the other hand, rejects the fetish gaze and the funny cute by remaining in his committed family life.

These shifting notions of Asian American desirability are highly implicated in generational identity. As Chong and Kim note,

> Not surprisingly, this process is occurring particularly among second-plus-generation men, who, unlike their immigrant parents, possess the cultural, linguistic, and social capital both to challenge and re-appropriate the conventional stereotypes that have historically denied Asian ethnic men full access to patriarchal dividends associated with (White) hegemonic masculinity.[44]

How Minhaj and Ansari articulate themselves against their parents, and their parents’ generation, plays a key role in how they construct a desirable persona. Through their different modes of engagement with ideas of otherness and desirability, both comedians reveal how Desi masculinity is continually being redefined—not just in relation to non-Desi masculinities but also through the generational positions they occupy within the South Asian diaspora.

Desi Masculinity as Generational Identity

Generational identity is a key lens through which to understand modern articulations of Desi masculinity. In the South Asian American context, generational identity distinguishes between first-generation immigrants, or those who migrated to the US in their adult lives, and second-generation individuals, who were either born or predominantly raised in the US and have first-generation parents. This distinction is deeply political when read through the lens of racialized masculinity and comedic performance.

Minhaj and Ansari both use charged humor as a strategy for navigating their second-generation identity. As a tool of differentiation, charged humor enables them to separate themselves from orientalizing white narratives and the model minority myth that have long stereotyped South Asians in American entertainment media. These reductionist narratives often cast their first-generation parents as perpetual foreigners, meaning that their position in what Claire Jean Kim theorizes as the racial triangulation model makes them unassimilable, relative to white and Black Americans, and therefore always an outsider.[45] Minhaj and Ansari construct a new version of Desi masculinity that is more assertive, outspoken, desirable, and ultimately, more legible to Western standards of masculinity. This extends to their romantic lives as well; both comedians speak about their relationships with white women, a symbol of assimilation and desirability that first-generation men are usually denied in dominant cultural narratives. As Davé outlines, a key marker of generational identity is the accent, an audible symbol of first-generation identity that marks individuals as perpetually foreign.[46] Importantly, Minhaj and Ansari's lack of South Asian accents renders them "masculine" in a way that is perceived as more "American" and thereby more "authentic." Through these embodiments, they lay claim to cultural citizenship by challenging the perpetual foreigner status given to Asian Americans, bringing complexity to the orientalist homogenization of the Indian diaspora, and pushing beyond the veil of model minority exceptionalism.

When these comedians perform charged humor to establish cultural citizenship, they are not necessarily challenging Asian American men's position in America's racial hierarchy; such an upset to the cultural order is impossible for an individual comedian to achieve. Rather, they are displacing the hierarchy's fixed articulations of ethnicity by challenging the white racial frames (such as orientalism and the model minority trope) that essentialize them through a fetishization of their culture as "exotic" and therefore subordinate in society. In *Homecoming King*, Minhaj offers a poignant illustration of this dynamic as he explores the gap between his own expectations of justice and his father's resigned pragmatism. Soon after 9/11, the Minhaj family receives an anonymous phone call saying, "Hey, you sand n****r. Where's Osama?...You can hear me right, you fucking d******n, where's Osama?...I'm going to fucking kill you."[47] Immediately after, they hear thuds outside and run outside to find their car windows shattered and the contents from inside the car stolen. While an enraged Minhaj runs up and down the street looking for the perpetrators, he notices his father silently sweeping the glass from the driveway. "Dad, why aren't you saying something?" he yells aggressively. His calm father simply replies, "These things happen, and these things will continue to happen. That's the price we pay for being here."[48] Minhaj uses this anecdote to push against the expectation of subservience embedded into the model minority narrative.

> My dad's from that generation like a lot of immigrants where he feels like if you come to this country, you pay the American dream tax. You endure some racism, and if it doesn't cost you your life, pay it...But for me, I was born here. So I actually have the audacity of equality. I'm like 'I'm in honors gov, I have it right here. Life, liberty, pursuit of happiness. All men are created equal' . . . I'm equal, I don't deserve this![49]

This scene exemplifies charged humor, offering a layered critique of both American racial ideology and intra-community expectations of stoicism and silence. Rather than fetishizing subordination or assimilating into white norms, Minhaj uses comedy to "push the needle forward little by little,"[50] offering a version of Desi masculinity that is assertive, politically engaged, and emotionally aware.

Ansari, too, uses his parents—and his parents' differences from him—as material in his stand-up shows. In *Live at MSG*, Ansari describes the amazing journey his parents had to go through in order for him to lead a relatively frictionless life in the US. Ansari's material also references the subservience expected of first-generation South Asian Americans, describing his father's hiring by a racist head of hospital. Ansari relates the lesson he learned when his father decided to be the "bigger person," then jokes that his father actually poisoned the head of the hospital: "And that's what you gotta do when you're an immigrant! Handle your shit! Kill some racist motherfuckers if you need to!"[51] The audience laughs along, knowing that it is, of course, a joke; yet the joke's catharsis lies in the discrepancy between Ansari being able to joke about committing murder over racism, versus his father's real-life decision to turn the other cheek. At the end of the show, Ansari brings his parents onstage with him to receive raucous applause. Ansari consistently returns to family life scenes with his parents, using their differences to sharpen his sets. He defines himself through difference—not just with a white comedic norm, but also from the first-generation vision of Desi masculinity, joking about his new entitlements to the convenience and privileges of birthright American citizenship.

Minhaj and Ansari are both second-generation immigrants, shaping themselves against their parents' generation of masculinity. And yet, as they age, new tensions, challenges, and articulations of masculinity will doubtless emerge, too. In his 2024 special, *Off With His Head,* Minhaj introduces his kids into the dynamic. In humorously describing an incident where his father and son are both throwing tantrums to him about their iPads, he positions himself as part of a "sandwich generation" that underscores the multigenerational labor of identity construction and signals the evolving stakes of performing Desi masculinity. Minhaj's son, as a third-generation American, might never know the realities that his father and grandfather contended with in the post-9/11 moment.

Ansari and Minhaj's ability to utilize their generational identity as a means of establishing cultural citizenship foregrounds the ways in which second-generation South Asian American men reshape the terms of Desi masculinity. Yet the cultural capital they accrue through this generational positioning, be it Ansari's appeal to a white dating pool or the authority Minhaj commands through his political storytelling, is not without limits—particularly when it comes to backstage scandals.

Controversy: Backstage

Through establishing themselves as desirable cultural citizens within the American cultural landscape, Ansari and Minhaj have expanded the boundaries of Desi masculinity and placed themselves within this framework onstage. However, each of these personas have been threatened by separate scandals from their backstage lives—and both comedians have used their backstage scandals as frontstage comedy material. In this section, we turn to each of the comedians' scandals separately, discussing context and how Ansari and Minhaj navigated those scandals from backstage blowback to material for their performances. Part of the genre of the stand-up comedian is to bend the reality between onstage persona and offstage anecdote. When offstage scandal challenges that onstage persona, the comedian's construction is put to the test. Ultimately, both Ansari and Minhaj achieved a redemption arc by making successful onstage comebacks.

Ansari's Scandal

When Tarana Burke's #MeToo was launched into a global movement in 2017, Ansari expressed immediate support for the movement. However, in January 2018, he became the center of a divisive #MeToo controversy when now-defunct feminist startup *Babe* published a pseudonymous accusation of sexual misconduct against Ansari.[52] In response, Ansari acknowledged the account as true, but maintained that he had believed all sexual contact he shared with his accuser was consensual.

The account divided Ansari's fans, as well as supporters of #MeToo. While some believed Ansari had done nothing wrong, others argued that he had inappropriately pressured the young woman into sexual contact.[53] Many observed that he had betrayed the feminist principles on which he built his career.[54] After the accusation, Ansari took time off from comedy, eventually returning with a "comeback special" in 2019 entitled *Right Now*.[55]

Within the first five minutes of *Right Now*, Ansari addresses the scandal. Shifting quickly from an upbeat elevated tone as he jokes about the number of times people confuse him with Hasan Minhaj, his voice quiets as he recounts his experience at the center of a sexual misconduct scandal.

> You know, I haven't said much about that whole thing. But, I've talked about it on this tour, 'cause you're here, and it means a lot to me. I'm sure some of you are curious how I feel about that whole situation. And, uh, it's a tricky thing for me to answer, 'cause I've felt so many things in the last year. There's times I felt scared, there's times I felt humiliated, there's times I felt embarrassed. Ultimately, I just felt terrible that this person felt this way. And after a year or so, I just hope it was a step forward. It moved things forward for me and made me think about a lot. I hope I've become a better person. And I always think about a conversation I had with one of my friends where he was like, "you know what, man? That whole thing made me think about every date I've ever been on." And I thought, "Wow. Well that's pretty incredible. It's made not just me, but other people be more thoughtful. And that's a good thing." And, that's how I feel about it.[56]

He gradually raises the volume of his voice and says, "And I know this isn't the most hilarious way to begin a comedy show. But it's important to me that you know how I feel about that whole thing before we share this night together."[57] Thunderous applause follows and the show formally begins.

Despite the accusations tarnishing his feminist persona, Ansari's onstage address is grounded in feminist politics by way of acknowledging the scandal and framing it as hope for a better tomorrow: "after a year or so, I just hope it was a step forward. It moved things forward for me and made me think about a lot. I hope I've become a better person."[58] Crucially, Ansari also addresses how his accuser felt in that moment: "I just felt terrible that this person felt this way,"[59] he acknowledges, validating her feelings. This sensitivity to the zeitgeist and commitment to progressive politics reaffirms Ansari's movement into a new expression of his Desi masculinity.

It's worth noting that this taped, and therefore canonical, version of his comeback special is much kinder than early reports of the show's tour would suggest; one listener reported the earlier sets included railing against "cancel culture."[60] But the self-presentation and self-awareness that Ansari brings to the taped performance of *Right Now* persists: In *Nightclub Comedian* (2022), he sits on a stool in Comedy Cellar's intimate setting, eyes downcast, and jokes about switching out his smartphone for a rudimentary flip phone.

Indeed, Ansari makes significant changes in his self-presentation in *Right Now*. He reconfigures himself as a calm, reassured man who no longer runs around on stage but rather sits on a stool. With a seemingly newly formed deep voice, he undoes the soft edges of his previously feminine qualities. Notably, Ansari no longer wears suits, but rather dresses in casual attire, perhaps inching toward a white sexual appeal. Ansari abandons his funny cute pretense of eliciting protection from his audience and embraces a more understated performance of self. He discards some of his clumsiness and expresses more confidence in his adulthood and masculinity. In other words, his persona is less cute and more mature. This onstage change reflects developments in his offstage life, including his December 2021 engagement to and subsequent June 2022 marriage to a Danish scientist [61].

These changes in self-presentation suggest that Ansari changed his onstage persona to be more in accordance with the backstage persona that had leaked and been subject to criticism. At first, the change seemed permanent; in *Nightclub Comedian,* like *Right Now*, Ansari remained clothed in more casual attire. However, on his most recent tour, *The Hypothetical Tour*, Ansari revives elements of his former onstage persona. High pitched voice, full suit, actively walking around the stage all mark the tour. This suggests that Ansari was forgiven by audiences, then returned to his previous identity expression with some key changes that blunted the Brown threat he once posed to the white dating pool. His material now draws on fertility issues and his marriage. Thus, Ansari rejects the erratic dating anecdotes that had brought him audience laughs but also been the source of his greatest offstage scandal.[62]

This change remaining permanent is crucial in the establishment of Ansari's redemption arc. The authenticity of his onstage persona was challenged, and then he did work to respond to that challenge, before returning to equilibrium. Throughout that process, the challenge to authenticity was remedied. Ansari was challenged and his challenge met with change, some of which stayed, while in other elements he returned to his old, beloved self.

Part of the ethos of the Ansari scandal was in the politics of consent. In his redemption era, Ansari's marriage to his (white) wife sealed off any potential future encounter that could be threatening in the same way to his onstage persona. In this way, Ansari affirms the feminist ethos that he constructed as part of his Model Man persona within the framework of a new Desi masculinity.

Minhaj's Scandal

In late 2023, Hasan Minhaj faced controversy, too—albeit of a very different nature—following a profile questioning the accuracy of the personal stories he shared in his stand-up specials, *Homecoming King* and *The King's Jester*. In this 2023 scandal, Hasan Minhaj was accused of lying about his experiences with racism by reporter Clare Malone from *The New Yorker*. The article stated:

> In Minhaj's approach to comedy, he leans heavily on his own experience as an Asian American and Muslim American, telling harrowing stories of law-enforcement entrapment and personal threats. For many of his fans, he has become an avatar for the power of representation in entertainment. But, after many weeks of trying, I had been unable to confirm some of the stories that he had told onstage. When we met on a recent afternoon, at a comedy club in the West Village, Minhaj acknowledged, for the first time, that many of the anecdotes he related in his Netflix specials were untrue. Still, he said that he stood by his work. "Every story in my style is built around a seed of truth," he said. "My comedy Arnold Palmer is seventy percent emotional truth—this happened—and then thirty percent hyperbole, exaggeration, fiction."[63]

Like the Ansari case, the aftermath of the *New Yorker* article caused fans to question the genuineness of Minhaj's constructed persona. Was the empiricist, fact-checking family man fabricating the stories that so many South Asian American fans genuinely related to? Their concerns were not assuaged by the fact that the article's release prompted the *Daily Show* to rescind Minhaj's offer as the full-time host. After a few weeks, Minhaj came forward with a YouTube video titled "My Response to the New Yorker Article" in which he acknowledged the allegations, apologized for letting viewers down, but then in his usual style, drew upon recordings of the interview with Malone, email exchanges, and other hard evidence to illustrate his claims that he was misrepresented in her profile.[64]

One key element was that Minhaj discussed how his *Patriot Act* and *Daily Show* material was meticulously researched and fact-checked, whereas the personal anecdotes he draws on for his onstage work are often embellished and reworked for dramatic effect. Minhaj holds onto that line fiercely, even as he acknowledges that his stand-up work and new satire shows used the same stylistic format: assembling "evidence" to show on a screen behind him onstage. Whereas the evidence in a *Patriot Act* episode might be real statistics and news headlines, his stand-up is marked by “evidence” like tweets, photos with people’s faces blurred out, and photos of himself and other celebrities—visual aids to help illustrate the oral point he was making.

This somewhat changed in October 2024, a year after the scandal broke, when Minhaj’s new stand-up comedy special *Off With His Head* premiered on Netflix after a cross-country tour. The show is different both from the YouTube response video and his previous stand-up work. Unlike *Homecoming King* and *King’s Jester*, there are no visual aids or snappy slideshows. Instead, Minhaj performs in a ring set up “like a public execution,”according to Netflix’s official source material.[65] The new stage is intimate, without a large screen to project such images, and Minhaj takes advantage of the proximity to his audience by addressing them. Instead of speaking to multiple cameras and referencing a PowerPoint, Minhaj does more audience work with the people in the room with him—much more like traditional stand-up than the political satire he was known for.[66]

Minhaj’s content also shifts in this new special: His new jokes are more vulgar, blunt, and violent. He turns a joke about urination into a metaphor for Israeli bombs dropped on Gaza, which keep “missing” their targets and massacring civilians. The genitalia reference makes for a highly gendered set that seems to emphasize the physical, perhaps signalling less of a feminist appeal. Close to the 20 minute mark, Minhaj addresses the *New Yorker* controversy. Maintaining his stance that he did nothing wrong, he jokingly laments that he was caught “embellishing for dramatic effect,”[67] noting it to be the “same crime your aunt is guilty of over Thanksgiving.”[68] He calls it a “dorky”[69] scandal, which indexes to his fact-checking, empirical, and informative persona. After briefly addressing this, he continues the new blunt, violent material, every so often daring his audience to fact-check him, and painstakingly correcting himself in a joke about what kind of car he owned. The challenge to “fact check!” becomes a punctuating call to action throughout the special, culminating in his howl “Don’t fact check comedy!” near the end of his set.[70]

On the other hand, Minhaj’s commentary on the relationship of Indian American parents with their adult children remains resonant. In that sense, Minhaj’s greatest gift in his stand-up remains his ability to articulate and connect with second-generation South Asian Americans whose stories continue to be underrepresented in mainstream media. This ability to relate to the population he seeks to represent as well as establish himself within the American media landscape all illustrate how he embodies a new Desi masculinity that is aware, authoritative, and unyieldingly unapologetic. By refusing to cede ground on his position as an epistemic agent, Minhaj refuses to apologize for his experience as a second-generation South Asian American man, who has (in his own words) the “audacity of equality”[71]—including in overcoming his own controversy.

Redemption

Ansari and Minhaj’s scandals are impossible to conflate. While Ansari was caught in the middle of a #MeToo movement in an encounter of questionable consent, Minhaj was accused of lying in his onstage work. However, these two men’s scandals—and their comebacks—share one important element: Both scandals threatened the authenticity of their onstage personas.

In their response to their scandals, both men stand firm. Ansari maintains that despite the harm he caused, he never intended to hurt anyone; Minhaj maintains that it is absurd to fact-check comedy. In their responses, both men go against the grain of model minority stereotypes and emasculated depictions of Asian Americans as rule following and respecting authority, to articulate a new Desi masculinity that is not so quick to fold. In their comebacks, they prove that Asian American men, just like “cancelled” white comedians, can weather the storm of audience disappointment and come back stronger, returning as prodigal sons to the auditoriums that eagerly await them.

In following these arcs, Minhaj and Ansari demonstrate a new axis of cultural citizenship: the redemption arc. When audiences are disappointed about the space between the onstage self and the backstage mistakes, Desi men can bridge that gap just as white comedians can. To be metaphorically booed offstage and invited back is another means of confirming cultural citizenship.

Conclusion

As the first Desi male comedians to reach mainstream fame in the US, Minhaj and Ansari defined themselves against one another. With so few Desi male comedians, it became an easy source of humor to joke about how two men with such different personalities and comedy brands could be thought to be the same. A decade later, in the 2020s, we are perhaps entering a new era of comedy that features multiple Desi masculinities, including imperfect ones in search of redemption.

Ultimately, a key to American cultural citizenship is authenticity. Minhaj and Ansari demonstrate separate redemption arcs after backstage scandals threatened their onstage persona. Yet in maintaining authenticity and repurposing these scandals for yet more relatable material, they are rewarded with audience forgiveness. Ansari and Minhaj maintain cultural citizenship by strengthening their authentic appeals to a new, Model Man–adjacent Desi masculinity, even in the face of it being threatened and needing redemption.

Even in its new, generationally fresh format, Desi masculinity is tied to patriarchy and heteronormativity. If Ansari and Minhaj were not cisgender, straight men, it seems unlikely that they would rise to the same level of fame—nor stage such successful comebacks. Their redemptions, and therefore their cultural citizenship, is contingent on normative gender and sexuality. As third, fourth, or fifth-generation Desis continue to climb the ranks of Hollywood and amass followings on YouTube and other platforms, these standards will continue to shift. One thing that remains certain is that Ansari and Minhaj undoubtedly left their mark on new articulations of masculinity as second-generation South Asian American Muslim men.

Notes

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21st-Century Sandwichmen: How Bicycle Couriers Contribute to Urban Food Delivery Platforms

by Josh Widera | Issue 14.2 (Fall 2025), Randy Martin Prize

ABSTRACT Bicycle couriers are key contributors to urban food delivery platforms. This article outlines the multiple and uneven ways in which delivery riders are “put to work” in the platform economy. Using the vignette of a single delivery by a bicycle courier working in Los Angeles, I illustrate some of the processes contained in platform labor. By breaking down in detail the economics behind platform food delivery, which is commonly performed at a loss, other forms of accumulating value beyond the delivery itself, such as being available, contributing advertising, and generating data become visible. Finally, exploring the history of the sandwich on one hand and the practice of employing human billboards, called “sandwichmen,” on the other helps highlight the ways in and conditions under which bicycle delivery riders are being put to work. Among other contributions, I conclude that bicycle couriers are the twenty-first century’s sandwichmen in both senses: delivering sandwiches to the wealthy and human billboards traversing urban space.

KEYWORDS advertising, bicycle couriers, data, delivery platforms, gig work, platform labor

Felipe is sitting on a low concrete bench between the Geffen Contemporary and a car park in Downtown Los Angeles when his phone chimes. The thirty-seven-year-old, originally from the Mexican state of Sinaloa, pulls his smart phone from a plastic bracket on his backpack’s shoulder strap and opens the DoorDash app. A new job: pick up from a deli in Chinatown, deliver to a home on Alvarado Street, where the neighborhood of Echo Park ends and Silver Lake begins. Pay is estimated between $7.49 and $9.49, plus tip. He nods at me, “let’s go,” and clips his phone back into its holster. He lifts a black bicycle helmet from the bench next to him, flips it on his head, and closes the buckle. He takes his bike by the handlebars, pushes it toward the parking lot and in one fluid motion lifts his right leg over the saddle and begins pedaling. It takes me a moment to pack away the small notebook and pen I was just using to jot down a field note and I take my own bike to hurry after him. As he rolls away, Felipe whistles a goodbye to his two colleagues, still perched on the benches. Underneath the boxy bright red backpack with the DoorDash logo he wears a gray long sleeve t-shirt. On one wrist dangles a single bike key from a coiled elastic band. Short brown hair peeks out under the helmet. He is wearing sneakers, crew socks, and baggy, knee-long shorts, as well as a utility pouch on his hip with a U-lock slid into the belt. His bicycle is a flat-bar mountain bike from the 1990s or early 2000s, a light blue Specialized. He exits the car park, crosses the sidewalk, and merges into the traffic on Temple Street before turning left on Alameda. It takes Felipe just under nine minutes to reach the sandwich shop on Broadway. I wait outside and as he opens the door of the deli, the smells of traffic are laced with yeast and relish.

Introduction

Workers like Felipe have become a common sight in today's cities. Working for food delivery platforms such as Postmates and Uber Eats, they move meals by car, motorcycle, bicycle, e-bike, scooter, and by foot. They play an integral role for companies promising the almost instantaneous availability of any meal at the push of a button. "The goal ultimately," as DoorDash CEO Tony Xu explains, "is to bring you everything inside your city in minutes, not hours or days."[1] Or, even more ambitiously: "We are trying to catalog, to digitize, the physical world."[2] What is being imagined is a new kind of urban life, revolutionized by technological innovation: cities rebuilt "from the internet up."[3] But narratives of this sort are reductive. As anthropologist and media scholar Shannon Mattern puts it, "We're left with the sense that everything knowable and worth knowing about a city can fit on a screen—which simply isn't true."[4] In reality, the transposition of the physical world into the digital remains necessarily incomplete and complicated.[5] Platforms like DoorDash continue to rely on physical spaces, goods, and labor to operate. And while in some places delivery drones are now seen rehearsing an alternative future for this industry,[6] it is still more likely, convenient, and affordable that workers like Felipe pick up and deliver our orders. They connect restaurants with customers and in doing so bridge the virtual marketplace provided through the app and the physical world in which the food is prepared and consumed.

It is important to recognize the extent to which delivery platforms rely on this bridge to function. But while it is clear that the task of delivering an order is a key component of food delivery services, it is important to consider the ways in which delivery workers provide far more labor and value to the platforms than what is contained in the act of the delivery. By acknowledging that the delivery itself is usually performed at a loss and that the work of the courier does not begin and end with pick-up and drop-off, we can refine our understanding of where and how value is generated in these processes: It becomes apparent that couriers are more than just delivery workers.

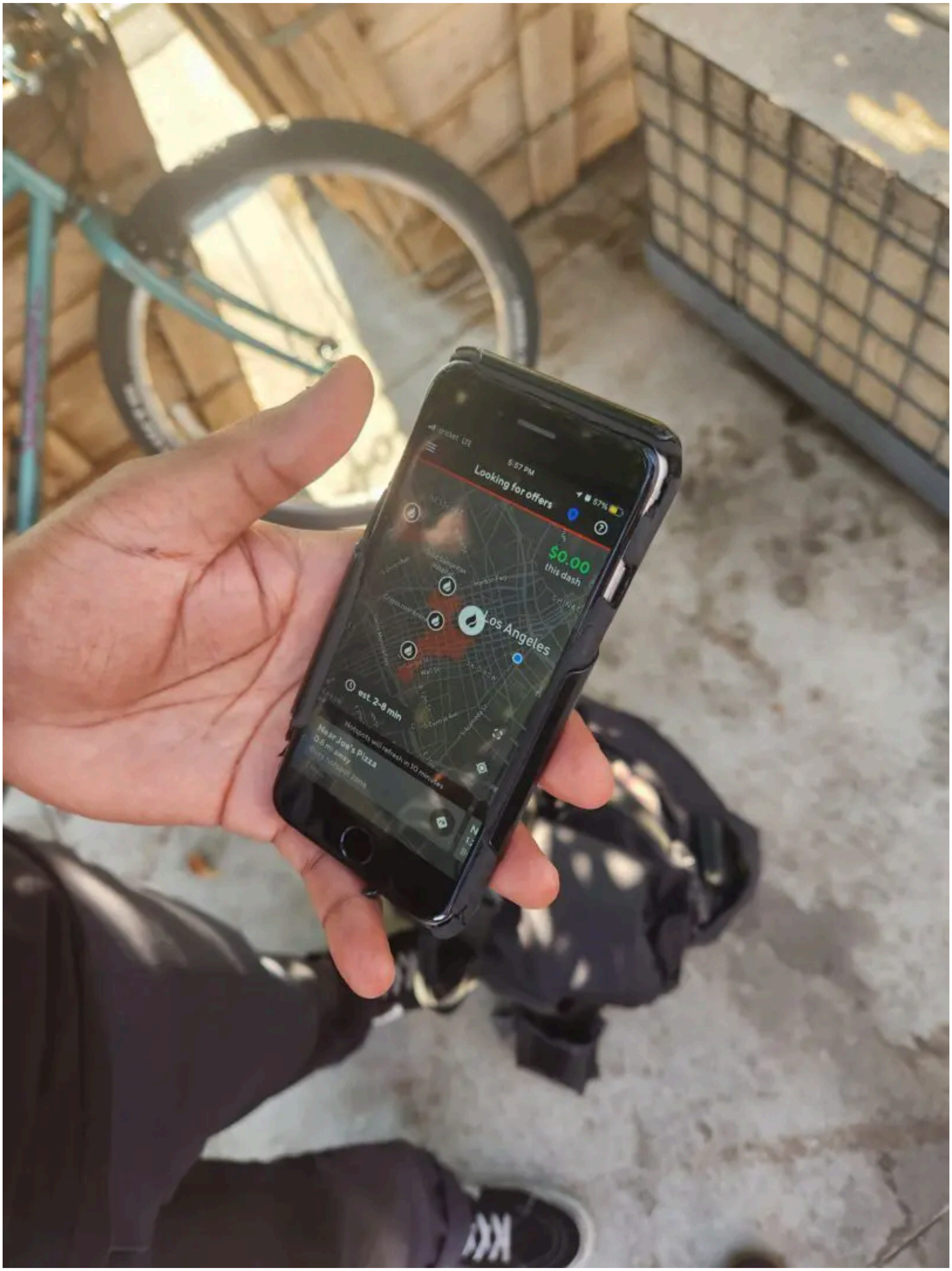
In what follows, I will first return to the opening vignette of a single delivery by a bicycle courier working for the platform DoorDash in Los Angeles. This account is synthesized from ethnographic fieldwork and offers an illustration for the subsequent argument. I then survey the economics behind platform food delivery to highlight what true costs are associated with an order and how companies like DoorDash have been operating at a loss for over a decade. This brings into focus some of the ways in which delivery workers produce value for platforms beyond the delivery itself. After that, I explore accounts of the eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century history of the sandwich on the one hand and the advertising strategy of "sandwichmen" on the other. This double history of the sandwich reveals a deep-rooted connection to wealth disparity and privilege in food delivery and long-standing practices of employing human billboards. I argue bicycle delivery riders in today's cities are "sandwichmen" in both senses of the word: delivering meals to the wealthy and employed as human billboards traversing urban space. Making these connections brings into focus the variegated, and uneven, ways in which delivery riders are "put to work" in the platform economy.

Vignette of a Sandwich Delivery, continued

This vignette was synthesized from over two years of fieldwork with bike couriers in Los Angeles and narrativizes Felipe's delivery of a single sandwich.[7] After collecting data and identifying themes and subthemes, I constructed a credible ideal type[8]—what Max Weber called a *Gedankenbild* [9]—to illustrate some of the common dimensions of bicycle delivery work.

I see Felipe approach the counter, then turn around. Our eyes meet through the window and he taps an imaginary watch on his wrist: the order is not ready, yet. He is offered a cup of water as he waits and watches the person behind the counter slice a baguette and stuff it with shredded pork and pickled vegetables. It is wrapped, cut, wrapped again, and slid into a plastic bag before it changes hands above the countertop. Felipe steps out of the shop before he swings the backpack off his shoulder and onto the pavement. The silver insulation material sparkles in California sunlight as he slides the plastic bag into the backpack. Felipe checks the delivery address on his smartphone, then gives me a thumbs up and smiles. We ascend Cesar Chavez Avenue and Sunset Boulevard before turning to side streets toward our destination. It is a ride of twenty minutes. Felipe uses bike paths unless they are blocked by parking cars or food trucks. When we approach intersections he merges into the lane and filters through slowing traffic to the front of the line, avoiding vehicles that could make a right turn without paying attention to bikes. As we get closer to the delivery address, Felipe grabs his phone and hits pause in the DoorDash app. This way he will not be assigned a new job after completing the current one and he has up to thirty-five minutes before he is forced to log on again. He explains that he does not want to get stuck out here. What can happen is that more jobs will be assigned to him in the periphery, taking the rider further and further from the center—to the extent that Los Angeles even consists of periphery and center—or keeping him in an area with a low order volume and too many steep hills. “It's not worth it.”

Felipe turns onto Alvarado Street and rises from the saddle as the road steepens. We pass one or two houses before the road splits into two one-way lanes: the right side leads further up the hill, while the left side flattens. The delivery address is on the left and so Felipe turns against the direction of traffic and rides to a gray, single story building. He dismounts and leans his bike against the wall, pulls his U-lock out of the holster, and locks his rear wheel to the bike's seat tube. Felipe slides out of his red, cubical backpack and extracts the sandwich out of the bag's reflective innards. A few low steps inset into the building's façade lead to the front door, separated from the sidewalk by a slim white column and two narrow arches that remind me of the paintings by Giorgio de Chirico. Following the instructions in the app, he leaves the sandwich at the doorstep, snaps a picture, and returns to his bike. No time is lost on the way back: Felipe rides back along Sunset Boulevard at full pace. He wants to be back downtown for the next job, minimizing unpaid time. As we approach the 110 Freeway crossing, Felipe unpauses his shift on the DoorDash app. Ready for another order but unsure where the pick up may be, Felipe coasts through the grid of Los Angeles' downtown, roughly positioning himself in proximity to a few restaurants he knows can get busy around this time. After a handful of minutes, his phone chimes again.


Looking for offers
$0.00
this dash
Los Angeles
est. 2-8 min
Near Joe's Pizza

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/1_navigating-Josh-Widera-1.jpg>

Figure 1. Navigating the app in Los Angeles, 2024. Photo by author.

Felipe's journey to Echo Park and back illustrates many of the important elements observed in my interviews and fieldwork: Spending time with riders, I witnessed how much time was spent standing by while logged on, waiting for assignments; how they inserted their expertise through shortcuts or trying to predict when orders might be ready for pick-up; I noted their dependence on tips for anything close to a living wage; and their engagement with and use of the platform, which affords them with a pause function that they employ strategically to claw back some control over where their shift will take them. Furthermore, it highlights some of the many pieces of expertise and anecdotal knowledge which the riders possess and which inform the way they ride and work, producing best practices over time—ranging from how to filter through traffic to knowing what areas promise higher order volumes. Felipe also serves as an ideal type as a male rider from an immigrant background, two demographic factors that are overrepresented among bicycle couriers. Other elements involved in the transaction do not become apparent in the vignette and are usually opaque to the riders: how the architecture and design of the app encourages particular orders and behaviors from patrons; how much the person spent on the order; how much DoorDash charged the restaurant; how Felipe's payout was calculated; and if the job was first offered to other delivery workers. These dimensions require a closer look at the economics behind food delivery services.

Economics of Platform Delivery Work

At face value, the vignette presents a straightforward example of the economic process behind the delivery: A customer ordered lunch and received it, paying for the food and its delivery. Felipe brought the requested sandwich from the restaurant to the customer's home, earning less in the process than what was paid for the delivery. The difference presents the profit margin for the delivery company and offers an example of the surplus value produced by Felipe's labor. We can complicate this basic equation with a closer inspection of the charges involved. DoorDash set their delivery fee between $1.99 and $5.99 (unless the client signs up for a monthly subscription instead), an additional small orders fee for any delivery under $15, a service fee that is usually around 10%, local taxes, and sometimes additional fees for peak pricing or surge charges when demand is higher than usual. Simultaneously, DoorDash charges restaurants for using their services on the other end. Commission fees range from 10% to 25% of the order, a service fee of 10% to 15% is applied, the restaurant is charged an additional delivery fee that ranges between $2 and $8, and an additional small orders fee may be applied. In a real world example, this means that if a user without a subscription orders a $20 sandwich in Los Angeles, DoorDash may bill them between $5.74 and $9.74 while charging the restaurant in the range of $6 to $16. On what would have been a $20 transaction between the restaurant and patron, DoorDash might earn a minimum of $11.74 and a maximum of $25.74.[10]

It goes without saying that Felipe would earn significantly less than that. The median net hourly earnings for delivery workers in California was $7.12 in 2022.[11] They desperately depend on tips from their customers, but even those are not always uncontested. An independent study by Working Washington showed that DoorDash systematically lowered the base pay on orders that had higher tips attached to them, meaning that larger tips did not result in proportionally more pay. Even after the company claimed to have adjusted their model to prevent the misappropriation of tips, real life data showed that jobs with higher tips still tend to have lower base pay.[12] On top of that, riders in California continue to be classified as independent contractors, stripping them of many of the privileges and protections that would result from employment. In 2020, Proposition 22—to which gig companies such as DoorDash and Uber donated a combined $205 million[13]—overturned Assembly Bill 5, which would have promised stronger protections against worker misclassification.

With Prop 22, certain minor concessions were made for workers: delivery riders like Felipe are now eligible for a monthly “healthcare stipend” if they consistently complete a certain amount of active riding time per week. If a rider manages to work for at least fifteen active hours per week for an entire quarter, they receive a bonus of $792.12, or roughly $61 per week.[14] So in the vignette above, Felipe is riding both for the payout attached to the delivery and toward fulfilling his riding time requirements. However, while this may incentivize riders to slow down, they remain interested in completing as many orders as possible in order to maximize pay. This is further stimulated by the app’s internal structure, which groups its workers in different tiers such as “Silver,” “Gold,” or “Platinum” based on their weekly acceptance rates, completion rates, and number of jobs. While DoorDash does not disclose how these classifications affect riders exactly, there is a direct link between higher tiers on the one hand and shorter wait times and more lucrative orders on the other. During my fieldwork, I noticed that riders who were in DoorDash’s second highest “Gold Tier” spent more time waiting than out for delivery. As a result, moving up into “Platinum,” which depends on the total number of jobs, as well as job acceptance and completion rates, becomes even more difficult—especially for riders juggling multiple jobs or other responsibilities. “Dashers” like Felipe will often work at least thirty hours to achieve the fifteen hours of active riding time required for a healthcare stipend. This adds to the general frustrations of not being able to reliably predict earnings, or even the logic by which jobs are assigned and pay-outs calculated.[15]

A rider’s services to DoorDash also include waiting in between orders while logged on, or returning into busy areas after a delivery has been made. Immediate availability of riders is of course an important element of DoorDash’s business model but riders are neither paid for this labor, nor does it count toward their active riding time. Being logged in and available is required of riders to be assigned work, and necessary for the platform to function, but is not itself remunerated in any way. Couriers find all sorts of ways to pass that time: riding around, standing by together, chatting, drinking, reading, playing games; but ultimately they remain ready to accept the next job at a moment’s notice and actively provide a service to the company as they stand by. Geographer Lizzie Richardson speaks of “coercive flexibility” whereby the free choice of a customer to order—in this case a sandwich from Chinatown to Echo Park—is enabled by the relative coercion into flexibility of a delivery worker, who needs to be ready and nearby, accept the order, and deliver it in a timely manner. Richardson outlines a threefold flexibility by which riders have to make themselves available, accept the risk that they might not earn anything at all, and when they are offered an order agree to variable rather than fixed pay.[16] This organizing relationship also means that the risk involved in managing supply and demand has largely been outsourced to the riders themselves. Since their availability standing by does not result in pay, too much competition by other riders or too few orders are a much bigger problem for the delivery workers than the platform.

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/2_photovoice-Josh-Widera-1.jpg>

Figure 2. “Standing by”: Photovoice picture by Nico, Los Angeles, 2024. Photo by Nicholas Rupnarain, used with permission.

What becomes apparent is that the value generated from our exemplary delivery would include not only the trip from the deli to the Echo Park neighborhood, but also various forms of unpaid labor such as the waiting time before an order was assigned and at the pick-up location, as well as Felipe’s return to downtown. And while these complications add further nuance to the equation of food delivery, an even larger contradiction has to be discussed. Despite their valuations, and the large amount of spending power big delivery platforms possess, for example when it comes to advertisement, lobbying, and legal expenses, most delivery companies rarely make a profit. In fact, the four largest standalone food delivery platforms have already racked up over $20 billion in operating losses since becoming publicly listed.[17] Uber has reported its first profitable year in 2023 since its inception in 2009 but does not disclose whether its food delivery subsidiary Uber Eats is operating at a profit or loss.[18] Similarly, Delivery Hero, which began in 2011, reported its first profitable year in 2023, but only using the adjusted EBITDA metric which calculates earnings excluding certain irregular costs.[19] Delivery Hero's Spanish subsidiary Glovo is confident that it can achieve its profitability goals and honor its debt payments mostly due to diversification away from pure food delivery and the integration of wide-reaching advertising integration into the app's ecosystem.[20] Across the industry, early bullishness is waning and external investors are more cautious when it comes to injecting venture capital into the delivery industry.[21]

Start-ups will explain that they operate in untested territory where quick growth is more important than actual sustainability and that loss-making is a temporary cost in their fight over the market. As outlined by science and technology studies scholar Jathan Sadowski, this aligns with the general principles of urban platform businesses, who are "more directly connected to consumers . . . more intent on rapid scaling-up . . . and more antagonistic to government regulations and incumbent industries."[22] That the strategy of aggressively absorbing losses is at least partially working can be seen in various cases around the world: After Spain passed stricter workers' protections under the *ley riders* (riders' law) in 2021, some companies, such as Deliveroo, ceased local operations[23] while market leader Glovo was able to leverage its position and continue to grow, despite being fined hundreds of millions of euros.[24] Another example shows how independently owned companies are often forced out of business: PDQ Couriers, a local courier company in Los Angeles, was forced to close after years of trying to compete with the artificially low rates offered by big apps.[25] Without the deep pockets of investors or venture capital, local businesses cannot afford to operate at a loss and thus struggle to remain open when platforms such as Uber Eats pursue a business model that can absorb losses for over a decade. Another argument is that the valuation of the company is based less on revenue than technological innovation. Investors are drawn to the infrastructures built by these platforms, rather than to the delivery service itself. This is in line with the mentality common among start-up ventures, who try to strike a big idea and sell, rather than building companies that promise sustainable long-term returns. These attempts to maximize market share and appeal to investors probably explain why DoorDash spends about 20% of its revenue on marketing.[26]

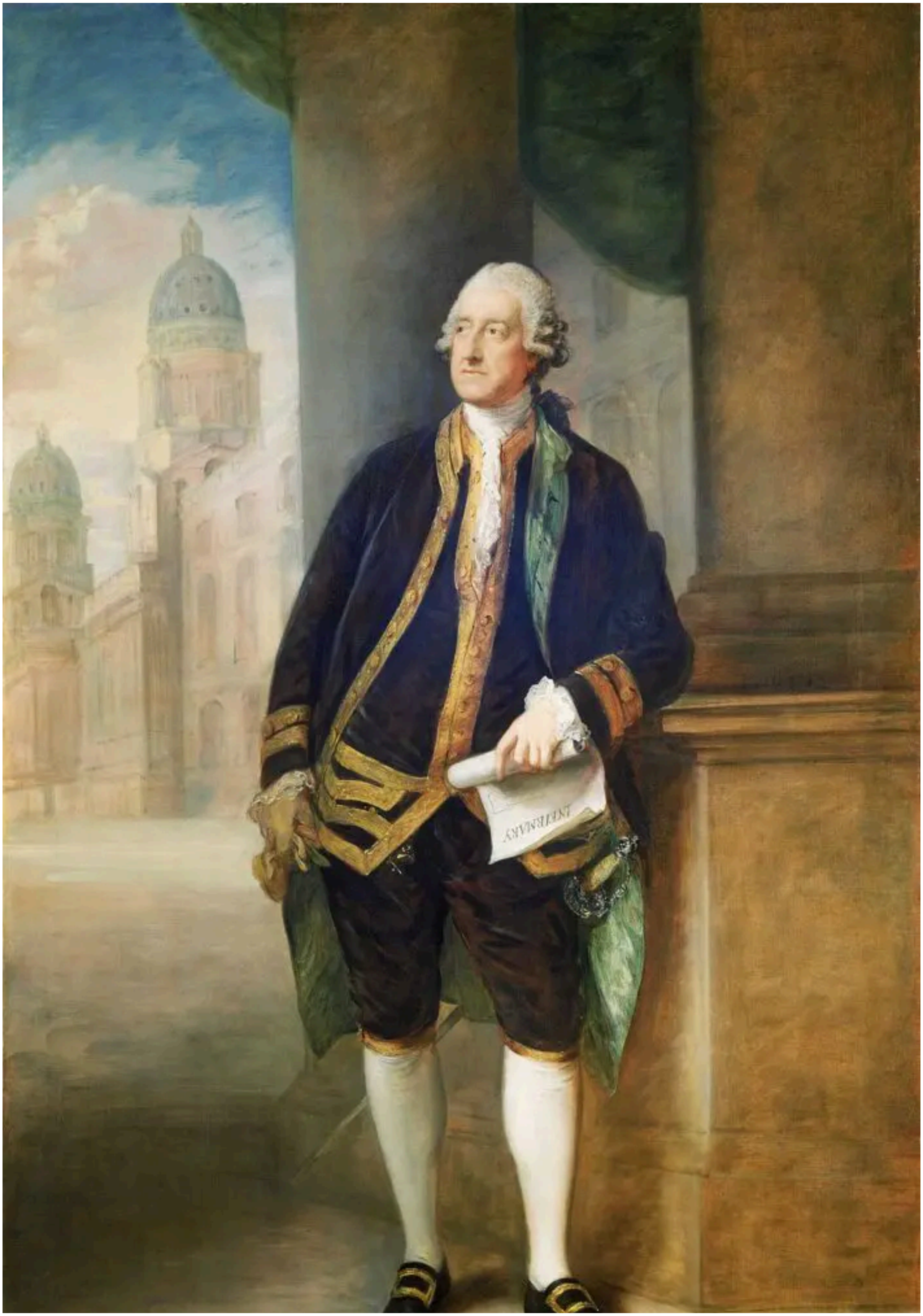
Visibility is key in contested markets. And it is no surprise that most companies have realized that they have access to extremely cost effective exposure: Their delivery riders move through the cities all day, often traversing the busiest and most compact urban cores, or standing by in areas close to restaurants. Many companies require or encourage uniforms, and hand out branded, on-color jackets and large insulated backpacks with the company logo. In the United States, platforms cannot obligate their riders to wear a uniform or branded bags, since couriers are classified as independent contractors. But companies still encourage it by selling their equipment at low rates and implementing certain size and insulation requirements for couriers. In some cases, branded gear is even available for free, for example during the early years of Caviar, a food delivery company that sold to DoorDash in 2019.[27] Advertisement is also increasingly becoming an active income stream for courier companies who offer vertical integration directly into their app's user interface. Delivery Hero began ad integration in 2022 and offered their clients "the opportunity to build a loyal fan base from scratch on our platform."[28] Similarly, a new initiative at DoorDash promises advertisers to "leverage DoorDash's extensive first-party data to target customers based on purchase behavior, preferences, and other predictive insights."[29] As such, platforms' ability to collect large amounts of personal data is a driving appeal for investors. From location data to purchases, ratings, browsing history, personal identifiers, and user content, platforms are able to collect a plethora of data points from their users—as well as their riders. It may be no surprise, then, that delivery platforms are often considered among some of the most invasive apps people install.[30] As Sadowski argues, data can be understood as a form of capital, and to collect as much of it as possible is an essential element in many contemporary business models.[31] The result is an economic regime in which the capture, extraction, and accumulation of data becomes an ideological imperative in its own right.[32] This data is leveraged for internal efficiency improvements as well as to attract potential advertisers, but it also forms a speculative economy as a key factor in company valuation. Geographer Julia Wagner shows how the data collection practiced by digital platforms has become mutually constitutive with processes of financialization and urbanization.[33] Bicycle couriers and other platform workers find themselves subjected to constant "dataveillance."[34] The continuous requirement of being connected to and surveilled by the company app is part of what labor scholar Ursula Huws has termed "logged labor:" Platform work is compartmentalized into a "log" of discrete tasks, worker activity is logged through constant surveillance, and the platform requires workers to always be logged on.[35]

What becomes increasingly clear is that value generation for delivery platforms does not happen exclusively or even primarily through their deliveries. In fact, in many instances the deliveries themselves are loss-making. Instead, advertisement, data extraction, and capital acquisition are the driving forces for companies like DoorDash and Delivery Hero. This challenges the equation of surplus value in the riders' delivery work outlined at the beginning of this section. Delivery riders are, in fact, not generating company profits by making deliveries. Instead, we need to understand their role in not-at-issue processes of the delivery, as their movement through and existence in urban public space generates data and brand visibility. Returning to our vignette, Felipe did not only bring a pork sandwich from Chinatown to Echo Park. His work for the company began when he logged into the platform to become available for assignments and included the time spent standing by before and after the delivery. He also generated unique data for DoorDash in the process and displayed a large red cube with the company's logo on it throughout the day. Ultimately, riders like Felipe are being put to work in various ways beyond the delivery. The datafication that affects their work—where and what they deliver, how they are managed, and how much they get paid—has itself become a labor process they are providing to the platform.

The Double History of the Sandwich

Two echoes of the sandwich linger in Felipe’s delivery. That of its invention, and that of a “sandwichman,” a person carrying advertising signs on their torso to serve as a human billboard. The term “sandwich” dates back to the eighteenth century, when John Montagu, Fourth Earl of Sandwich, is said to have popularized the habit of eating beef between two slices of bread. Without naming the earl in question, the French traveller Pierre-Jean Grosley gave the following account from an English gaming club in 1772:

> A minister of state passed four and twenty hours at a public gaming table, so absorbed in play, that, during the whole time, he had no subsistence but a bit of beef, between two slices of toasted bread, which he eat [sic] without ever quitting the game. This new dish grew highly in vogue, during my residence in London: it was called by the name of the minister who invented it.[36]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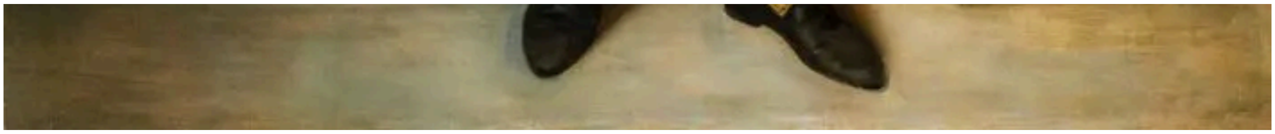


< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/3_montagu-Josh-Widera-1.jpeg>

Figure 3. Portrait of John Montagu, Fourth Earl of Sandwich, by Thomas Gainsborough, 1783. Courtesy of the National Maritime Museum.

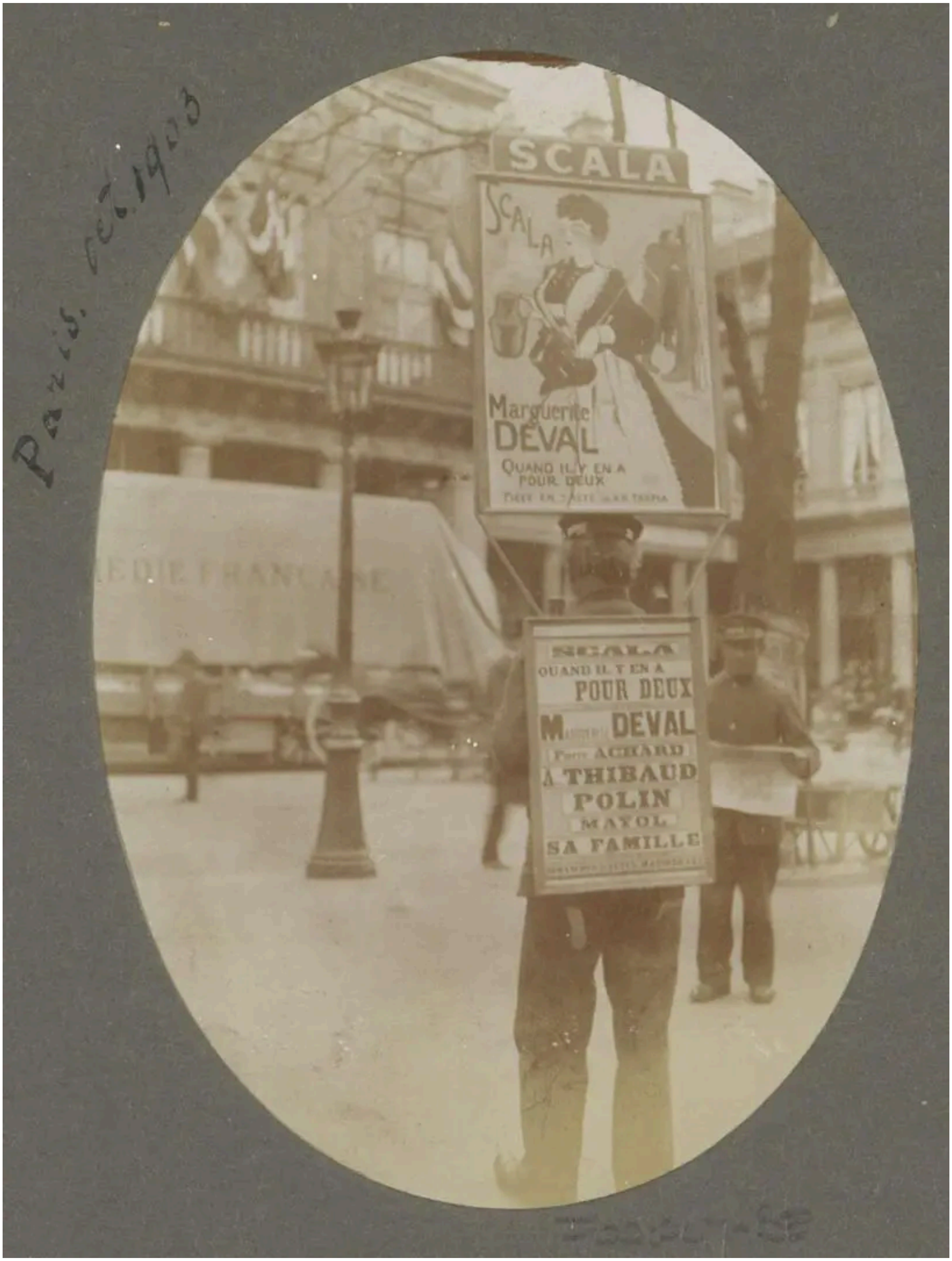
The origins of the sandwich are linked to leisure and wealth. It began as a way for the Earl of Sandwich to remain at the gaming table, from where it grew in popularity among the bourgeoisie throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries with picnics organized around the handheld food item becoming particularly fashionable.[37] Despite the fact that we might think of the sandwich today as a humble meal, perhaps a packed lunch of a worker or student, the origin story and our vignette reveal another layer. After all, these sandwiches are prepared for and delivered to their patrons by others, indicating an entirely different type of convenience than the packed lunch. In fact, philosopher Susan Buck-Morss considered if perhaps the sandwich became “the traditional lunch of the worker [to] make it possible for him to remain at his work station, like Lord Montagu [sic] at his gaming table.”[38] What allows the Earl of Sandwich to pursue leisure is later incorporated into modern labor conditions as a way to streamline one’s break or avoid unnecessary spending at work.

Delivery work requires a similar flexibility. And although their work station is more mobile than the factory floor Buck-Morss evokes, as long as they are logged in for a shift, couriers need to be ready for the next order. Bringing a packed lunch, something I observed a lot during my fieldwork, allows riders to stay available and is a way to save money. It is possible that Felipe would have been carrying two sandwiches to Echo Park: one prepared at home this morning to provide him with sustenance during his shift and one ordered through the app and to be delivered to a stranger. Between these two sandwiches opens the digital divide of the platform economy, pointing not only at the separation of who has access to certain culinary experiences but also to the privilege of mobilizing another body for their delivery. Many of the places riders deliver from are outside of their own price range. Additionally, very few use the platform services they participate in. As one rider put it when I asked him if he uses DoorDash, “No, never. Why would I pay money for that? Maybe, if I am really busy, I could see using Instacart, you know, save myself the trip to the supermarket. But if I get food from somewhere I call and I go pick it up.”

The history of the sandwich shows that privilege has been one of its earliest ingredients. This meal enabled the Earl of Sandwich and other members of the aristocracy and bourgeoisie to give even more time to leisure—to such an extent that Grosley suggested it came “at the expense of their repose and their health.”[39] But it should also be noted that the story of the sandwich’s invention Grosley provides us with does not make visible those who prepared and delivered the meal to John Montagu. While the Earl lives on, Felipe’s predecessors disappear. Our vignette on the other hand does not reveal the context of Felipe’s customer and to be sure, there are a myriad of reasons why they may have ordered this meal to be delivered. But it is possible to imagine a similar scenario to the eighteenth-century earl: A peek through the window at the Echo Park address may well have revealed a body on a sofa, head turned toward a screen and hands clutching a gaming controller, absorbed, like the Earl of Sandwich, in play. Today, class distinction materializes both in the meal and its delivery. By and large, delivered meals used to be an exclusive domain of affordable take-away cuisines, like Chinese or pizza. But with delivery platforms like DoorDash, the market of home delivery spread to all types of restaurants, including artisanal sandwiches and even fine dining.[40] But these insights do not have to lead to overdeterminism. As the work of geographer David Bissell shows, while power imbalances are certainly an integral part of platform infrastructures, users also relate to these tools in complex, variegated, and changeable ways.[41]

The second echo evoked by the vignette of a delivery is that of the sandwichman, a human billboard who carries a sandwich board of advertisement strapped to their torso. This was a common practice for urban advertising in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The term sandwichman is traced back to Charles Dickens who, in a collection of literary sketches about everyday life in London, mentions “an animated sandwich, composed of a boy between two boards.”[42] In the story, the boy wearing a sandwich board is advertising a grand ball hosted by a member of the King’s Theatre, intimating who was able to afford human billboards. Dicken’s poignant style also draws out the levels of objectification these laborers may have experienced. In his arcades project, philosopher Walter Benjamin repeatedly shows interest in the figure of the sandwichman, whom he labels the final incarnation of the flâneur,[43] or a “flâneur salarié,” a salaried flâneur.[44] What Benjamin meant is that both urban experience and existence of the flâneur were primarily mediated by consumption and that this convergence of consumerism and traversing urban space culminated in the sandwichman, whose advertising of consumer products was no longer just an undercurrent of a practice of loitering—as was the case with the flâneur—but the explicit assignment. Just as for the invention of the sandwich at the hands of a gambling eighteenth-century aristocrat, the Dickensian “animated sandwich” has a social history marked by class. As Buck-Morss explained with reference to this advertisement practice in twentieth-century Paris:

> The sandwichman was a denigrated, yet familiar figure in Paris in the 1930s, one which would have entered the perceptive range of most city-dwellers. Human billboards, they advertised and publicized the products and events (cinemas, store sales) of bourgeois consumer culture. Yet they themselves, despite the uniforms they were loaned to give a respectable appearance, were associated closely with poverty.[45]


Paris, oct. 1903
SCALA
SCALA
Marguerite DEVAL
QUAND IL Y EN A POUR DEUX
EDIE FRANCAISE
SCALA
QUAND IL Y EN A POUR DEUX
Marguerite DEVAL
Pierre ACHARD
A THIBAUD
POLIN
MAYOL
SA FAMILLE

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/4_sandwichman-Josh-Widera-1.jpg>

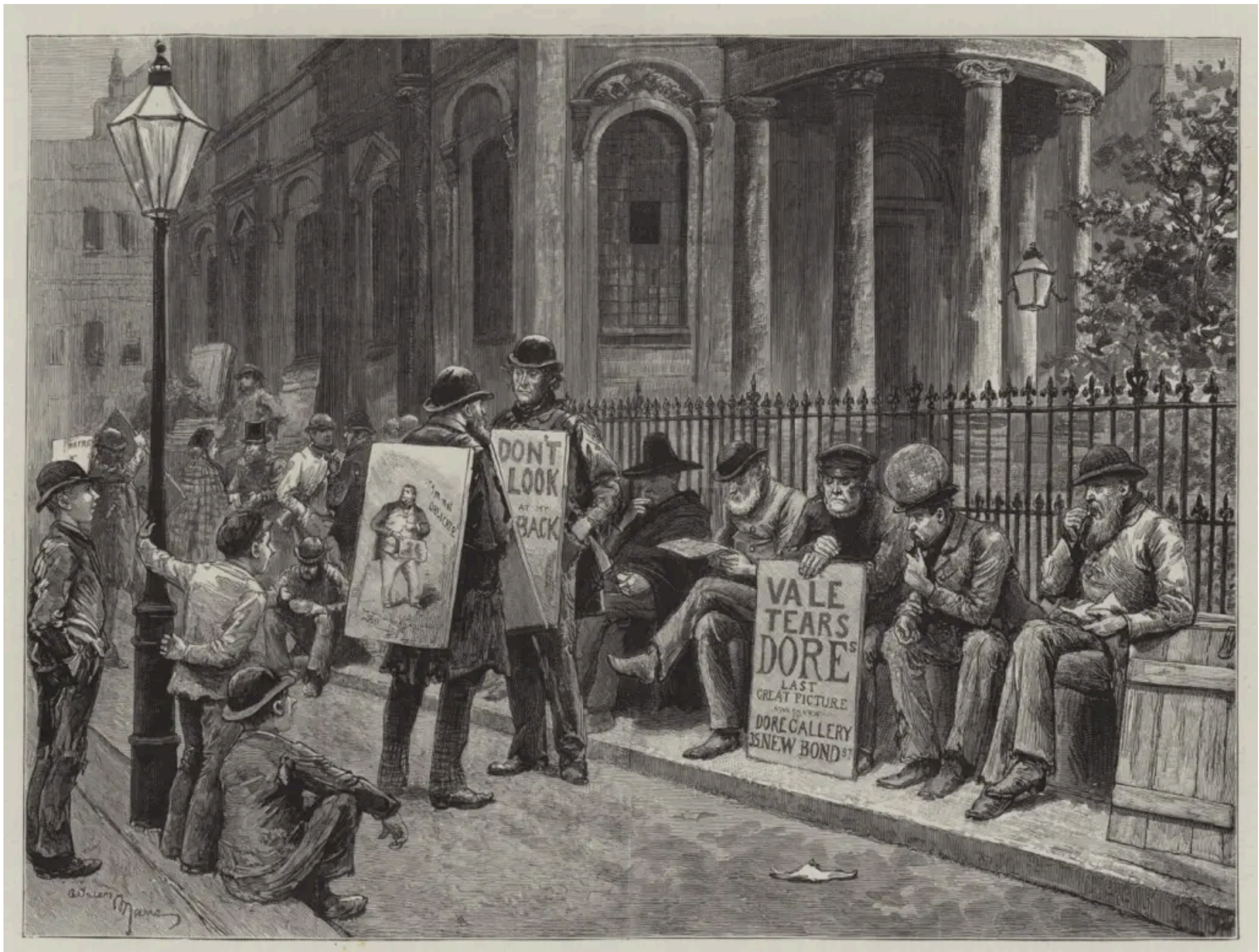
Figure 4. Sandwichman on the street in Paris advertising "Quand il y en a pour deux" and Marguerite Deval, 1903. Courtesy of Rijksmuseum.

Those advertising the perks and offerings of a bourgeois lifestyle did not have access to those perks themselves. They were usually recruited from "clochards," Paris' unhoused population, of which there were around twelve thousand registered in the 1930s,[46] and were employed as casual, part-time, and non-unionized workers.[47]

Buck-Morss's project of revisiting Benjamin's interest in the sandwichman alongside the history of the sandwich is one of reintroducing the political and social reality to both stories: that of labor and that of consumption. She leaves us with an image of the sandwichman that invites many parallels to today's food delivery workers. In the same vein as sandwichmen were paid to be reduced to a sign, part of the value delivery workers provide is as a human billboard. The recognizable image of a cyclist with a colorful cubicular backpack has become not only a representation of food delivery, but a symbol of gig work itself. And if we remember that most companies do not actually turn a profit with their deliveries, it becomes even more crucial that delivery riders are put to work in this fashion.

Just as Buck-Morss's sandwichmen, bicycle couriers are sometimes offered uniforms—branded jackets, shirts, and delivery bags—on loan or at reduced cost.[48] And they too are non-unionized and employed casually, classified as independent workers, which allows companies to circumvent additional costs associated with employment, such as sick days, paid leave, or health insurance coverage. Today's food delivery workers come from all walks of life, but are often marginalized and economically disadvantaged, as platforms tend to recruit a workforce that is particularly vulnerable. During my fieldwork in Los Angeles, only two interlocutors were white and most of them came from migrant communities. Similar to how illegality is instrumentalized as an economic tool for profitability in the construction of "impossible subjects,"[49] the vulnerability of certain surplus populations is leveraged to sustain low wages and poor conditions in this industry. In the United States, as in many parts of the world, what political theorist Nick Srnicek calls "platform capitalism"[50] goes hand in hand with racial capitalism[51]—a connection that is further mirrored in the supposed freedom of independent contractors who often remain dependent on the platform employer in variegated ways.[52]

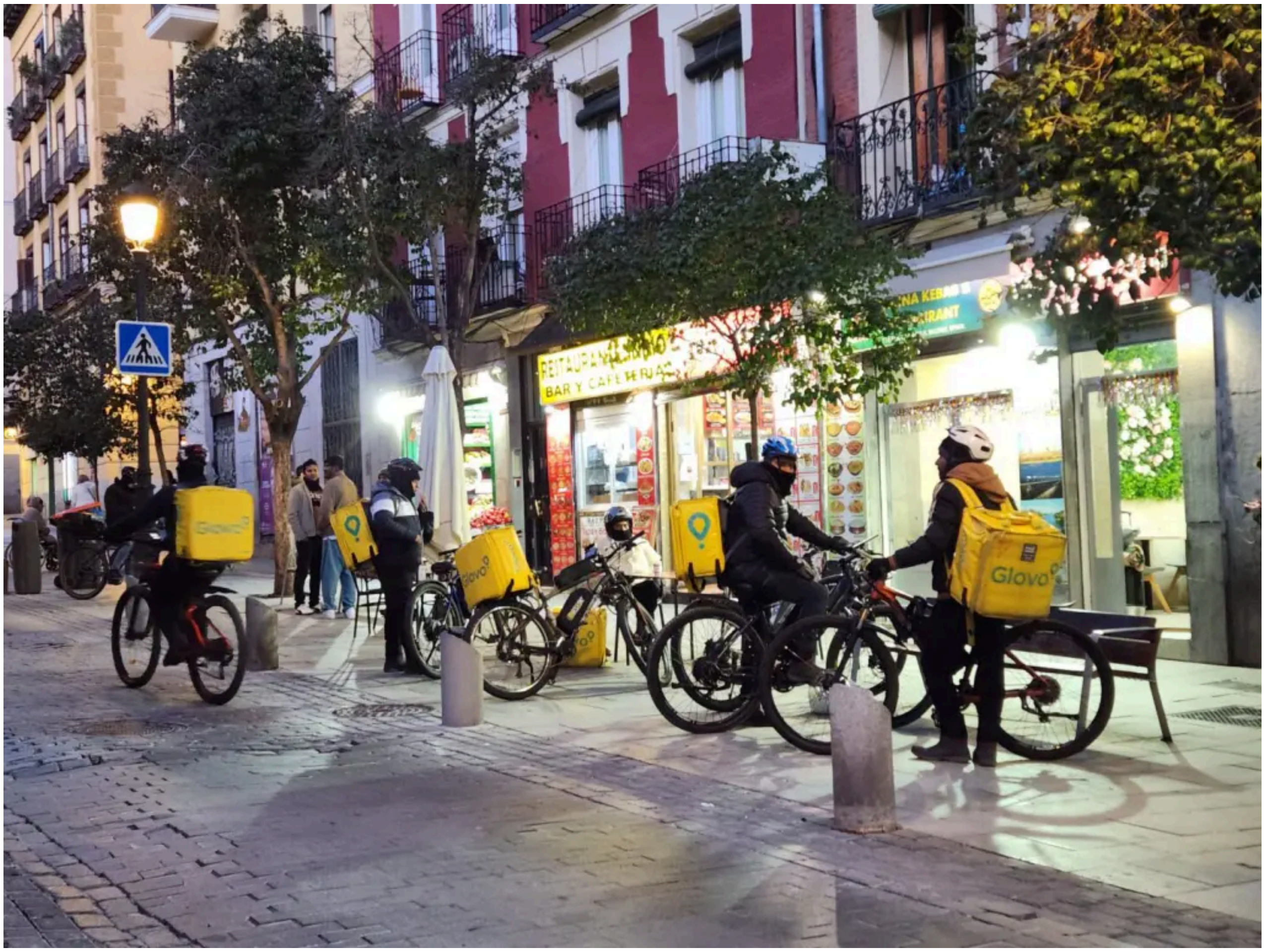
Buck-Morss reminds us that her review of the 1930s still matters today, when she says that "the clochards of Paris"—those who were employed as sandwichmen—"are still with us. Capitalism replenishes their number, if not drastically via Depressions, then gradually via automation."[53] Both these factors also play a role in the case of delivery workers: The platform economy—and its urban expressions—grew out of the Great Recession and the 2008 financial crisis. Many platform companies today, including major food delivery platforms, all launched right around that moment, when workers were desperate for income and governments reluctant to spend on services and infrastructure. Their management has been automated, which makes many of the decisions and mechanisms more opaque, black-boxed in the app's algorithms. This has made it easier for companies to underpay or produce uneven remuneration[54], and harder for workers to organize. Simultaneously, further automation in the form of drone delivery is already being tried and is looming over workers, potentially increasing their willingness to compete at low pay.[55] Capitalism still replenishes the numbers of those willing or required to work under exploitative conditions in the gig economy, both by depressions and automations. Many of the attributes of the sandwichman observed by Dickens, Benjamin, and Buck-Morss resonate with today's food delivery workers, riding through our streets, advertising a consumer culture largely out of their own reach, precarious flag bearers of the platform city.


DON'T LOOK AT MY BACK
VALE TEARS DORE'S LAST GREAT PICTURE
DORE GALLERY 35 NEW BOND ST

A MID-DAY REST—"SANDWICH-MEN" IN THE STRAND

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/5_strand-Josh-Widera-1.jpg>

Figure 5. A Mid-Day Rest, "Sandwich-Men" in the Strand. Illustration for *The Graphic*, 27 December 1884. Courtesy of Look and Learn.



< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/6_riders-Josh-Widera.jpg>

Figure 6. Glovo riders waiting for orders. Madrid, 2025. Photo by author.

Conclusion

Meanwhile, Felipe has returned to his colleagues near the Geffen Contemporary. They stand by together, sharing anecdotes of their day, trading stories of close encounters in traffic, generous customers, and long wait times. They talk about their families and TV shows. They watch their phones and passersby. While this article has made apparent some of the ways in which bicycle delivery workers are "put to work," it is also worth remembering that there are elements of the job that are meaningful and enjoyable to riders.[56] Everyday life, in this sense, continues to be a "process in excess," despite much of the precarity it brings for platform delivery workers.[57] Using the vignette of a delivery of a single sandwich in Los Angeles as its starting point, I have examined the value a rider contributes to the delivery platform that neither begins nor ends with the delivery. Their work also includes their flexibility in when and where they make themselves available for work, the data they generate while logged in, and the advertising they provide for the app. These not-at-issue ways of providing value become more important when considering that the primary labor, that of the delivery itself, is often performed at a loss.[58] These other forms of value generation, as well as some of the inherent power imbalances of platform labor are interrogated through the double history of the sandwich: that of the invention of the meal and that of the practice of employing “sandwichmen” for advertising.

Delivery riders have to be understood as offering more to their employers than the delivery of an item, providing value by occupying public space; participating in urban data collection; managing labor, time, and supply and demand; and parading the company brand on their bags and uniforms. Bicycle couriers are twenty-first-century sandwichmen in both senses of the word: they deliver sandwiches—and other meals, of course—to those more affluent than themselves and simultaneously act as human billboards for companies competing over market share and visibility. As Uber Eats, DoorDash, and Postmates offer us fantasies of urban futures, their army of sandwichmen pours onto the streets, waits in public squares, and squeezes through rush hour traffic. They peddle promises to potential customers, while their data flows back into the digital infrastructure through which they are interpellated. Strapped to a bag that is also a billboard, they advertise comfort, convenience, and chow mein.

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What Does Black Protest Appear to Be?

by Kevin Rigby Jr. | Aporias, Issue 14.2 (Fall 2025)

ABSTRACT This article interrogates the visual and political logics that make black protest intelligible within modern regimes of political appearance. Focusing on the Black Lives Matter movement and the 2020 Minneapolis uprising, the essay draws on Afropessimist and psychoanalytic theory to examine how the riot unsettles the frameworks that render Blackness legible only through vulnerability, loss, or redemptive spectacle. Against interpretations that recuperate black protest as democratic renewal or moral claim, it theorizes black protest as a site of rupture rather than representation, and as an encounter that exposes the limits of visibility politics and gestures toward a mode of relation unbound from recognition, redemption, or the demand to appear.

KEYWORDS Afropessimism, Black Lives Matter, politics, psychoanalysis, social movements

I: On the Space of Appearance

I begin with a provocation that it is necessary to unsettle the assumptive invocation of black protest as the emergence of the possibility for transformative recognition, the chance for an otherwise “impossible relation” between black and white, and its presumptive function as an opportunity for democratic renewal–liberal, abolitionist, or otherwise. Moreover, I propose that the space black protest opens is (and has been) crucially related to a strategy of making visible the racist geographies and social arrangements of surveillance, containment, and killing, and the value of black people, which we might read as a critique of who and what appears in social and political life. That is, an indictment of who is seen to matter and a contestation of the production of that difference. Further, insofar as the production of difference as a matter of appearance and visibility denotes a racist political-aesthetic regime, critical attention is due to not only what black protest does with the visibility it achieves, which many scholars have considered, but more fundamentally, how a racist regime of appearance structures, even as it is intervened upon by, black protest.[1]

Here, we can take the recent Black Lives Matter movement as a critical contemporary site to elucidate the stakes of the interrogation. The protest begins with the circulation of a cell phone video of a cop gunning a black person down. This critical countersurveillance of routinely disappeared recursions of state violence forms a digital co-presence through the appearance of the dead and dying black body.[2] The insistence on witnessing and making visible these racist geographies and social arrangements drives black people (and their allies) to assemble at sites of connection: restaurants, bridges, roads, and public spaces. Embodied black protest emerges as a critique of appearance as a matter of life and death. It questions who makes up the public ("Whose streets?"), who can appear and be seen as human within it ("Hands up! Don't shoot!"), and the value of those lives and bodies that are disappeared and destroyed by the reigning order of appearance ("Black Lives Matter!"). Consequently, I ask, what does black protest appear to be?

Black Lives Matter's creation of new publics ostensibly presented new possibilities for relation, new resources to imagine an organization of life and matter, sociality and politics, and the temporality of a present and future otherwise than now.[3] According to this popular view, the interjection and practice of witnessing opens a democratic and dialogic potential for sociality.[4] Protest, in this account, makes us visible to one another, allowing us to mutually create and enter a space of common existence and interdependence, assuming responsibility for a radically expansive (not merely inclusive) notion of the political body. In this sense, black protest appears to be a radical critique of the racist administration of visibility. By reorganizing the value that some kinds of racial visibility can herald, it is seen to present a transformative opportunity for blacks and nonblacks alike to renew themselves as political subjects through a seeing of the other in a different order of appearance: “When Black people get free, everybody gets free.”[5]

Throughout the Black Lives Matter movement, this axiom oriented the struggle for black freedom within a broader political worldview of a universal freedom for all people. Consider the protocol of “centering blackness” that #Asians4BlackLives, a solidarity group in the San Francisco Bay Area that emerged in 2014 in response to organizers in Ferguson’s call to action, posted online after a solidarity action blocking the entrance to an Oakland police station for the amount of time Michael Brown’s slain body laid in the street:

> We understand that the path to liberation for all communities travels through the liberation of Black communities in America. When Black people have justice and liberation, we all move one big step closer to real freedom. To us, solidarity encompasses understanding that we will never be truly free till Black people are free.[6]

This axiomatic invocation emerged because of the consensus among radical activists (and among academic theorists of antiblackness) that the centrality of antiblackness in social and political life was tied to and antecedent of other vectors of violence and inequity, and that there was, a priori, an inextricable link between these struggles that subtended *any* struggle against oppression.[7] It became an ethical imperative, based on the recognition of linked oppression, to understand the primacy and urgency of black liberation. Yet, I would like to take a step back to consider the conditions that led to the emergence of this solidarity. I posit that it was the *appearance of Michael Brown’s dead body*, the space of appearance literally outlined in the street, and the duration of that appearance, extended by its viral circulation, that together constituted a spatio-temporal field that reoriented bodies, claims, and relations through the coordinates of visibility, vulnerability, and recognition. In this configuration, the inextricability of struggles was apprehended less as a structural truth than as a visceral response to the spectacle of black death—making antiblackness palpable to a broader public precisely through its lethal manifestations. This reframing helped shape the widespread adoption of solidarity with the movement.

In this sense, the grounds of solidarity were bound to the visibility of black death. This is not unique to Michael Brown. The catalysts of Black Lives Matter—those whose political subjectivity emerged in protest—were dead. Trayvon Martin, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, too many others. Their deaths preceded their political appearance as subjects; the emergence of a movement through the embodied protests of black people did not appear from a mobilized constituency making claims upon democratic ideals, but from a politicized mourning, what we might call a politics of the socially dead. We can understand the rallying cry "Black Lives Matter," then, as paradoxically both an affirmation of life and an acknowledgment that the price of political entry is death. Black political appearance is thus an engagement with a recursive scene in which blackness is rendered visible only as a figure of loss, vulnerability, and an opportunity for the redemption of others. The demand for inclusion into political subjectivity is thus predicated on a prior demand: that blackness first be rendered through its deathly figuration in the political imaginary.

However, this prior demand for and appearance of the dead black body has gone overlooked in critical engagements with this idea. Nicholas Mirzoeff, perhaps the most eloquent recent exponent of this visual-democratic frame, helps us see the contours and limits of a broader political-aesthetic imaginary. In *The Appearance of Black Lives Matter,* Mirzoeff, following Butler's reformulation of Arendt, figures the appearance of black protest in the "reversal of vulnerability" staged by protestors chanting and gesticulating "Hands up! Don't shoot!" and the redeployment of the direct-action strategy of die-ins. He writes,

> The signature gestures of the post-Ferguson movement were the new action “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” and the appropriation of the older tactic of the mass die-in. By appropriative reversal of vulnerability, these embodied performances reclaimed the right to existence, the first claim of all abolition. This vulnerable moment creates a dynamic whereby those following or watching feel actively engaged, whether online or locally. It calls to the witness and the watcher to become engaged first through bodily mimesis and then by making the watching body political.[8]

Building on the idea that these gestures provoke identification through embodied vulnerability, Mirzoeff contends that the space of appearance enables mutual recognition and relational invention:

> In that space, the black person and those in affiliation with blackness might also see each other otherwise than as predicated by the color line and invent each other in an uneven but dialogic imagination. The freedom of appearance is a practice, whereby we make ourselves visible to each other. The person designated white appears in order to listen to what the other, identifying as black, might have to say, even and especially when they are silent.[9]

In sum, Mirzoeff argues that “Black Lives Matter created a new means to “prefigure a different ‘America,’ a space of appearance for abolition democracy.”[10] Although generative in its effort to reclaim visual space for black life, this account underestimates the disciplinary architecture of appearance and its relationship to political-juridical order, as well as the “public” as a space defined by that relationship. Such accounts collapse the distinction between witness and spectator, endowing the latter with the ethical urgency of the former. Moreover, insofar as he frames the space of appearance as an opportunity to realize a different American democratic political project, I find Mirzoeff’s optimism about the political actor (black or nonblack) anachronistic to the contemporary moment of political struggle. The framework assumes a democratic public sphere that does not exist in the form he imagines. The vision of a dialogic encounter presupposes political subjects who can meaningfully participate in constructing legal and political discourse; however, what if that participatory capacity has been fundamentally altered? The conflation of witness and spectator becomes particularly problematic when we consider how digital circulation transforms witnessing *into* spectatorship, that is, how the viral circulation of black death creates not active witnesses but passive spectators.

Mirzoeff figures BLM protestors as epistemic agents in a participatory democracy, capable of shaping political discourse. But, as Guglielmo Siniscalchi warns in "Spectatorial Democracy," this participatory model may be obsolete.[11] Drawing on Guy Debord, Siniscalchi contends that "the birth of the 'society of images' has put the [political subject] in an increasingly less active role [. . .] in controlling the legal limits of power exertion."[12] As a spectator, he writes, "the recipient has no choice but to applaud or disagree with the mise-en-scène of the legal discourse's development."[13]

Following Siniscalchi, the shift from participatory citizenship to spectatorial democracy reflects a broader transformation in which the political-juridical order is no longer constructed through democratic processes (perhaps itself already a fantasy) but increasingly shaped by transnational economic forces (here, we might consider the global social media platforms that were crucial to the proliferation of solidarity like Meta, X, and TikTok), rendering the public a mere audience to decisions made elsewhere, beyond their reach, in a mise-en-scène they observe but no longer enter. The circulation of black death, while critical to the movement's emergence, is inextricable from the profit incentive of transnational corporations. Such a link encourages us to not only consider how the space of appearance is inaugurated in protest (as the circulation of black countersurveillance), but also how the enabling conditions of that appearance may have structurally delimited the forms of political subjectivity and their agentive capacities in ways that circumscribe the dialogic potential of interracial encounter. Thus, we might say that the transition from participatory democracy to spectatorial democracy marks not simply a loss of agency, but a structural displacement of political construction into economic circuits controlled by transnational corporations. This shift sharpens the stakes of digital “copresence” lauded by thinkers like Loretta Baldassar and Mirzoeff; the circulation of black death may produce affective communion or tactical visibility, but it also fuels a platform economy in which witnessing becomes a mode of passive legitimation and profit extraction, rather than a catalyst for political transformation.

Insofar as Mirzoeff understands assembly and appearance as making visible a political claim, the transformative potential they attribute to that revelation depends on a prior assumption about how visibility works, namely, that appearing enables one to act as an epistemic agent capable of reorienting the public toward a more just sense of relationality or interdependence. But this assumes that visibility itself retains political efficacy. If, as Siniscalchi argues, the public sphere has become a site not of participation but of spectatorship, then the space of appearance may no longer enable one to participate in the construction of political meaning–it might only allow one to assent or dissent within a scene whose terms are already established. The spectator, unlike the witness, is structurally positioned to *view* the performance of legitimacy rather than intervene in its construction. Even practices of countersurveillance, turning the gaze back onto the sovereign body, may only invert the terms of the spectacle rather than exit it. Such accounts risk reaffirming the legitimacy of the visual order by framing political possibility as a matter of recognition within its frame, when, I argue, what black protest reveals is that this order cannot be resituated; it can only be ruptured.

What if we refused the assumption that appearance, visibility, or the broader regime of image and representation hold radical potential? Not simply because blacks are excluded or dehumanized within these regimes, but because these ocular logics already overdetermine black protest as either a moral critique of, or a redemptive contribution to, the social order, its limit, and horizon.[14] To predicate the political on the capacity to appear is, analytically, to concede the terms of the order in advance. The insistence that all bodies *can* appear, and that differently situated bodies might *see* one another anew through that appearance, forecloses a more rigorous critique of the visual regime itself. It presumes that the space of appearance remains a viable site of intervention, rather than interrogating how that space is already structured by antiblack violence and organized to metabolize black visibility into legibility, and legibility into capture.

Rather than affirming appearance as the site where bodies become visible in new relation, I argue that such a formulation relies on what Denise Ferreira da Silva has critiqued as the *transparency thesis*: the modern onto-epistemological presumption that being and meaning are effects of interiority and temporality.[15] That is, they treat the black subject's appearance as self-evident, politically legible, and universally intelligible, assuming the scene of assembly, "hands up," die-ins, or silent mourning, automatically yield recognition, relation, and democratic renewal. But this assumes too much. It presumes that blackness can appear as such, that its transformed meaning can emerge through a visual regime structured by universal reason, without interrogating the productive matrix through which modernity institutes blackness as exterior to both politics and self-determined being. Let us not make the same mistake.

Hands up, dying-in, or silent. These are the sites of protest that open a new space of appearance "otherwise than as predicated by the color line."[16] And yet, these sites where black people appear *otherwise* curiously mirror what political theorist Erin R. Pineda, in her trenchant book theorizing how the civil rights movement operates as the horizon of judgement for all civil disobedience, identifies as the "nonviolent, noncoercive, persuasive" actions that are "oriented toward common, constitutional principles that ensure [black civil disobedience] remains governed by the impulses of public reason and the norms of citizenly conduct within the constitutional democratic state."[17] What Pineda's analysis brings forward here is the disciplinary frame through which the appearance, character, and meaning of black protest are overdetermined by a political-aesthetic regime ensuring a sense of social harmony as a prerequisite for legitimacy or persuasion.[18]

Why is it that this form of black protest—supplicant, vulnerable, still—persists in even so-called ‘abolitionist’ theorizations of its potential? What is it about black political appearance that invariably reduces its offering and ethical call to and through the image of the (socially) dead or dying black body? Or that limits the array of legitimate forms of appeal which might righteously call nonblacks into ethical relation, to performances of vulnerability? Disarmed, silent, playing dead. The space of appearance, then, is not neutral terrain, and “theorizing can itself perform racial power.”[19] Rather, it is the scene through which blackness is rendered available to others as a figure of suffering, lack, or redemption. In this sense, such frames are not an escape from the racial regime of representation, nor its transformation, but a reiteration of its terms, one in which black protest functions less as an interruption than as a momentary intensification of the Enlightenment’s political-aesthetic fantasy.

If we begin to see that the space of appearance rests on an assumption of blackness as self-evident and politically intelligible, capable of catalyzing new social bonds simply through the act of being seen, but only through a restrictive repertoire of appeal, then we must also ask what this framework cannot register. What if black protest does not always take place *within* the visual and epistemic architecture of recognition, but at times ruptures it entirely? What if its force lies not in being rendered visible, but in disorganizing the sensorial conditions of visibility itself? Here, the scene of the riot becomes instructive, not as a negation of appearance, but as an event that unsettles the grammar through which black political appearance becomes meaningful. It demands that we attend not simply to what is seen, but to how racial meaning is produced in the first place, that is, to the representational order that renders blackness available only as loss, death, or redemptive foil. The riot as a site of black protest, I argue, stages an encounter through a sensorial break from the regime of appearance.

II: Look, a Riot!

So far, the detailing of my provocation has centered on phenomenological readings of black protest that foreground visibility and recognition—readings that treat protest as a strategy of making visible, of appearing, and of entering relation through appearance. In a way, such accountings imagine the "space of appearance" as a kind of clear, cloudless day: a place of legibility, where bodies appear directly and meaning might be apprehended in full light. However, if appearance depends on conditions of exposure, we might ask: under what environmental and affective conditions does appearance occur? It may, after all, allow us to see things differently. Both Butler and Mirzoeff, in similar ways, explore the political potential of the space of appearance when bodies appear peacefully, nonviolently, silently, or vulnerably. My argument is not that the opposite is true–that the riot's disorientation, noise, and fragmentation hold some more authentic promise of appearance. Rather, I want to mark how even asking what black protest appears to be often repeats the structure of the bind: that blackness is not only bound to appear, but, we could say, bound *in order to* appear.[20] That is, black protest is made to signify within a tightly regulated aesthetic-political regime that overdetermines what appears, how, and to whom.

Think about when, where, and how the riot comes–at night, in the dark–as a sensorial encounter in which what appears to make sense is dislodged. Here, light doesn't so much illuminate as shatter: the burst of a Molotov, the sudden flare of flame licking up a wall, the strobing sirens casting everything in epileptic red and blue. Heat presses against your skin and singes your lungs with smoke that clouds your vision, chokes your breath. The police station is burning. But so are the grocery store and the pharmacy. "We burning this down. I grew up around here. Fuck that building . . . fuck it all," someone says.[21] Not just buildings, but the ordinary coordinates of belonging. The space of appearance doesn't open cleanly. A stranger's eyes catch yours for a split second through fogged goggles and a bandana. You see yourself lit up–exposed–under the spotlight of a cop car or caught in the dizzy wash of sirens. The boundaries between watcher and watched collapse. And the sound: glass shattering, alarms wailing, bodies chanting and howling. The scream splits the air, and everything is vibrating, unsteady. Nothing holds.

This representation of the riot is not meant to stand in contradistinction to the space of appearance described above, nor to posit rioters "in action" as a more legitimate form of political presence. I do not claim that the riot is a truer or purer site of appearance. I stage it instead to mark how black protest, when it riots, summons an encounter with sensorial and symbolic disorientation. It unsettles the frameworks through which meaning coheres. The riot is not only disobedient but also destabilizing. This brings us to a question too rarely asked: what makes black protest *black*? And what kinds of moral, ethical, or political commitments are smuggled into that naming? More often than actions of civil disobedience, black riots are often positioned within scholarly and journalistic discourse as objects requiring translation, offered up with interpretive frames that instruct us how to read a riot, how to justify its appearance. From Ferguson to Minneapolis, and in the so-called global "rebirth of history," the riot has been reabsorbed into political discourse as a symptomatic response to the crisis of late capitalism.

Joshua Clover offers perhaps the most influential materialist theorization of this return. He positions the riot as the logical successor to the strike in an era of surplus populations: a formation where the riot, like the strike, emerges from structural antagonism, now outside the workplace, in relation to state violence.[22] For Clover, the riot is "both marked by and marks out race," intimately entangled with racialization and exclusion.[23] Here, blackness becomes legible insofar as it signals a structural exclusion within the capitalist order, one that can be understood through the grammar of political-economic contradiction and democratic injury. Similarly, Ricky Mouser has argued that riots can be morally justified as intermediate harms, between disobedience and revolution, when they arise in response to racialized state violence.[24] Both thinkers, in different ways, treat the riot as politically legible, even if uncivil. As a result, black riots are reframed as democratic expressions of grievance—“deeply aggrieved citizens,” realizing their antagonism to the state through protest.[25]

But such accounts risk reenacting the very move I aim to unsettle: the conversion of black rebellion into coherent political speech. Building on the skepticism toward appearance developed in the first half of this article, I propose instead that the riot is black not because of the presence of black people, although that presence is far from irrelevant; rather, it emerges from the unbearable condition of blackness as nothingness: a structural position excluded from the world, yet made to sustain its coherence.[26] In this sense, black protest *appearing* is not a gesture toward truth, but an emergence of what is unendurable in what blackness is made to bear.

Three propositions follow:

1. Blackness disturbs every stable formation of identity and difference.[27]
2. Blackness is not presence but displacement—a (mis)naming of what psychoanalysis might call *ab-sens*.[28]
3. Blackness, as an ontological impossibility, should not be conflated with the figures through which that impossibility appears.

Put differently, blackness is not an identity, a social position, or a political stance–it is the condition through which such positions are made thinkable, precisely by being excluded. If there is such a thing as a “black riot,” it is not because of who riots, but because the riot materializes the antagonism that blackness names: the recursive, foundational exclusion that world-making requires. The riot stages a crisis of sense that exceeds all available representational and ethical frames. And this is why it must be translated, rendered legible, made to “mean.” But the un-recuperated riot threatens something else: not simply injustice, but *unjustifiability*. It gestures toward a loss that cannot be signified–an expenditure without reserve.[29] And so, theory rushes in to stabilize the threat, to tether the riot back to political form, to excise what cannot be incorporated. This cut, I argue, is not merely interpretive–it reinscribes the very operation of worlding, in the sense of *making* sense, that the Symbolic Order performs.[30] In this sense, blackness does "not correlate with any particular social attribute or to a mode of 'being' that any subject could properly claim."[31] We might understand the blackness of the riot as what Saidiya Hartman reads as the threat of black revolution that becomes effaced by what "black protest" appears to be.[32] The latter is interpreted as the truth of worlding, or what "Just" worlding might entail, but I am arguing that this is only a further displacement of an ontological impossibility that "black people" do not *inherently* represent (this is the contingency of political ontology in Sexton's sense), but whose representation, as it has been constructed, has been figured, as if it were given, as the truth of worlding's cost. But the riot's blackness does not impute moralism, ethics, or politics. In fact, such things arise precisely through the (re)production of blackness as such, as nothingness, the exclusion against which such things form.

Thus, it is not, in other words, my aim here to present a "better" empirical representation of the riot, nor to valorize its destructiveness by arguing its proportionality relative to antiblackness. Rather, it is my goal to conceptually disorient how the riot appears, to render it less an event to be read than a breach to be felt, a space-time that (not always, not inevitably) permits a confrontation with the *drive* that compels the cut.[33] That is, the ways we all, including black people, recursively mobilize the figure of the "black riot" to stage that cut again and again: to cast blackness as the nonincorporable remainder whose exclusion affords the proper ethical discernment of any black political tradition. Blackness is the radical negativity of the riot that does not refer to something substantive —"the black" as a being *per se*—but what, within the current order, is inimical to itself: those parts that not only cannot be recuperated but are antagonistic to such recuperation. Here, we might think of the anti-sociality of burning the world down, the way the flame exceeds proportional constraints indiscriminately.[34] In such moments, the riot's force is not measured by what it achieves or represents but by the unreserved expenditure of its negativity—a release that, even as it may be seized upon and made visible within regimes of appearance, refuses their measure.

Conclusion

Throughout this analysis, I have argued that both the “peaceful” manifestations of black protest, such as hands-up, die-ins, and silent mourning, and the more severe sensorial disruptions of the riot remain ensnared within a visual-political regime that can only render blackness legible through death, vulnerability, or spectacular disruption. Whether appearing as supplicant or destroyer, the black protester is made to signify within coordinates that overdetermine not simply what can be seen, but what can *mean*. The space of appearance, far from offering an escape from racial violence, functions as the scene through which that violence is reproduced, even, and especially, when it appears to be overcome. This creates what we might call the appearance trap: black protest must appear to matter but can only appear as that which must be excised from mattering. The calls to “see” black humanity, to “witness” black suffering, to “recognize” black worth all reproduce the scopic regime that produces blackness as visible only in its negation. Even riots, when theorized as expressions of legitimate grievance or structural antagonism, become reabsorbed into a political discourse that transforms disruption into democratic speech.

But what if the most radical gesture is not to appear differently, but to refuse appearance altogether? Not purely in the oppositional sense, in which one might still *appear*, if only in the “negative,” but in the sense of withdrawing from the regime that makes visibility a condition of political possibility? This is not a call for strategic or fugitive invisibility or tactical retreat, but rather an attention to those forms of black life that operate outside the demand to be seen, recognized, or interpreted. Consider the “Mandate for Black People” conceptualized by organizer Mary Hooks, which circulated broadly as a call-and-response during the Black Lives Matter Movement:

> The Mandate for Black People in This Time
> Is to Avenge the Suffering of Our Ancestors;
> To Earn the Respect of Future Generations;
> And Be Willing to Be Transformed in the Service of the Work

No mention of citizenship, the state, the child, belonging, or success, but a connection to ancestors past and future. If blackness is that which must always be excised, if it is indeed outside of everything, I think Hooks's invocation offers a different account of black protest irreducible to class or nation-based claims and unsatisfactorily thought within race as a modality of class antagonism that would clarify its appearance or aims. Instead, I find a transhistorical vision of black political action as something that exists within a continuum not delineated by the pretext of solidarity, democratic renewal, or the linear notion of reproductive futurity, so commonly framed as the impetus of black politics. Instead, it suggests forms of black living and practice that exist as what Christina Sharpe might call "wake work," that is, the ongoing labor of living in the afterlife of slavery without becoming (and unable to become) fully captured by its terms.[35]

Further, the unspecified temporal expansion that links "this time," "future generation," and "be transformed" might fruitfully be thought of as the transhistorical engendering of histories of those contingently designated persons or groups figured as the catachreses of blackness, that is, figures of "nothing." This engendering is not the reproduction of identity or lineage in any stable sense, but a way of making sense, as we must, of those called black without enclosing them within the ontologizing gestures this article refuses. The ancestor does not appear in the normative visual-political field–cannot be seen, recognized, or interpolated as subject–yet remains a force that structures black living and the temporality of protest. We might glimpse, then, and only glimpse, as it is always refracted by an order of sense which overdetermines it in the final instance, how we might imagine the crisis of kinship and identity that the afterlife of slavery makes into a properly political problem (of legitimacy, solidarity, and justice) approached not as a deficit or lack, but as the hint of a radically different orientation to who we are to one another, and what we might ethically owe.

Yet even as I write this, I am aware that theorizing this call-and-response practice risks reproducing the very cut I seek to expose. The horizon—the hint of a radically different orientation—recedes just as I reach for it in thought. That reach becomes another self-reflexive attempt to draw a boundary of blackness within which I might feel at home, related, ethical. This dehiscence haunts every effort to bring the end of the world into ethical meaning: a refusal of full disorientation, a tepid agnosticism. I begin to wonder if this split is not also my mandate.

Notes

1. I want to be clear that in distinguishing between protest and riot, I am not valorizing the riot as a more authentic or truthful form of political action. To do so would risk repeating the logic of authenticity I critique. Instead, my argument is that the riot unsettles authenticity as a category altogether: it disorients rather than confirms political recognition, undoing the possibility of recuperation within a hierarchy of more or less legitimate forms of protest. ↩

2. Loretta Baldassar et al., “ICT-Based Co-Presence in Transnational Families and Communities: Challenging the Premise of Face-to-Face Proximity in Sustaining Relationships,” *Global Networks* 16 (April 2016): 134. ↩

3. Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Harvard University Press, 2015); also see Christopher Paul Harris, *To Build a Black Future: The Radical Politics of Joy, Pain, and Care* (Princeton University Press, 2023) for a similarly framed exploration. ↩

4. Allissa V. Richardson, *Bearing Witness While Black: African Americans, Smartphones, and the New Protest #Journalism* (Oxford University Press, 2020). ↩

5. Alicia Garza, “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement,” *The Feminist Wire*, October 7, 2014, accessed July 20, 2025, http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/ < http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/> . ↩

6. “Who we are,” *Asians 4 Black Lives*, accessed July 20, 2025, https://a4bl.wordpress.com/who-we-are/ < https://a4bl.wordpress.com/who-we-are/> .

↩

7. This formulation recalls the Combahee River Collective's declaration that "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression" (A Black Feminist Statement, 1977). In the present moment, with various degrees of awareness of this lineage, similar axioms circulate widely voiced not only by radical Black feminist organizers but also across multiracial activist coalitions, NGOs, and social media. As the following discussion suggests, in the context of Black Lives Matter, the uptake of this "freedom for all through Black liberation" logic has been powerfully mediated by the visibility of Black death, such that solidarity and legibility alike are often bound to the spectacle of loss and death. While not a repudiation of the CRC's formulation, this contemporary dynamic raises questions about the conditions under which Black political centrality is recognized and the costs of that recognition. ↩

8. Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Appearance of Black Lives Matter* (NAME Publications, 2017), 96. ↩

9. Nicholas Mirzoeff, "Tactics of Appearance for Abolition Democracy #BlackLivesMatter," *Critical Inquiry*, 2017, https://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/tactics_of_appearance < https://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/tactics_of_appearance/> . ↩

10. Mirzoeff, "Tactics," 18. ↩

11. G. Siniscalchi, "Spectatorial Democracy," in *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Constitutionalism*, ed. J. Cremades, C. Hermida (Springer, Cham, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-31739-7_171-1 < https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-31739-7_171-1> . ↩

12. Siniscalchi, "Spectatorial Democracy," 1. ↩

13. Siniscalchi, "Spectatorial Democracy," 1. ↩

14. Here I am in conversation with Rizvana Bradley's similar engagement with this idea. See Rizvana Bradley, *Anteaesthetics: Black Aesthesis and the Critique of Form* (Stanford University Press, 2023). ↩

15. Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (University of Minnesota Press, February 22, 2007). ↩

16. Mirzoeff, *Appearance*, 20. ↩

17. Erin R. Pineda, *Seeing Like an Activist: Civil Disobedience and the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 7. ↩

18. Here, I borrow the notion of a "sense of social harmony" from Bradley's deployment of it as the "collective political unconscious." ↩

19. Pineda, *Seeing Like an Activist*, 17. ↩

20. Huey Copeland, in *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America* (University of Chicago Press, 2013) borrows the book's title from a quote by Cedric Robinson in *Black Marxism*. Aligning himself as a scholar of the black radical tradition, in a Robinsonian sense, he writes, "in their projects, {scholars of the BRT} position blackness as a discursive site that is both 'bound to violence' {...} and 'bound to appear' within Western culture, whether in the form of a racist figurine or, more tellingly, an avant-garde tour de force" (11–12). I invoke his meaning here and expand it slightly to consider the ways in which blackness's mandate to appear is also, always, and already contained by and through that mandate. ↩

21. Here I am quoting a protestor who appeared in the livestream of the George Floyd Uprisings from independent media organization Unicorn Riot's multi-day recording. Unicorn Riot, "George Floyd Uprising in Minneapolis–Saint Paul: The First Two Weeks," June 12, 2020, https://unicornriot.ninja/2020/george-floyd-uprising-in-minneapolis-saint-paul-the-first-two-weeks/ < https://unicornriot.ninja/2020/george-floyd-uprising-in-minneapolis-saint-paul-the-first-two-weeks/> , accessed June 6, 2024, timestamp: 2:45:00–2:50:00. ↩

22. Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot: The New Era of Uprisings* (Verso, 2016). ↩

23. Clover, *Riot*, 168. ↩

24. Ricky Mouser, "How To Read A Riot," *Journal of Ethics & Social Philosophy* 26, no. 3 (2024): 445+, < http://dx.doi.org.libproxy.berkeley.edu/10.26556/jesp.v26i3.2316> https://doi.org/10.26556/jesp.v26i3.2316 < https://doi.org/10.26556/jesp.v26i3.2316> . ↩

25. Mouser, "How To Read A Riot," 464–465. ↩

26. On blackness as nothingness, see especially Calvin Warren's *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation.* ↩

27. Jared Sexton, "Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word," *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* 29 (2016): 3, https://doi.org/10.20415/rhiz /029.e02. ↩

28. While my use of *ab-sens* draws on Lee Edelman's psychoanalytic account of the absenting of meaning from being, it should not be read as a substitution for, or dilution of afropessimist analyses of *non-sense* of black ontology. I mobilize *ab-sens* as a concept for thinking about the crisis of intelligibility and sense that structures regimes of appearance rather than as a total theory of black being. In this respect, *ab-sens* names a formal antagonism to legibility that intersects with, but does not exhaust afropessimist claims concerning blackness and being, but demonstrates how black protest can precipitate a breakdown of sense that exposes the limits of political and aesthetic recuperation.See *Bad Education: Why Queer Theory Teaches Us Nothing* (Duke University Press, 2022), 4. ↩

29. On expenditure without reserve see David Marriott, "On Decadence: Bling Bling," *e-flux Journal* 79 (February 2017), or more broadly, Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (Zone Books, 1991). ↩

30. Here I am drawing on the psychoanalytic concept of the cut, particularly as developed in Lacanian theory, where it refers to the fundamental rupture that inaugurates subjectivity. The cut marks the moment the subject is separated from the Real by entry into language (the Symbolic), establishing both lack and desire. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (MIT Press, February 2006). ↩

31. Edelman, *Bad Education*, 29. ↩

32. Frank B. Wilderson III, “Blacks and the Master/Slave Relation,” in *Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction*, ed. Frank B. Wilderson III (Racked & Dispatched, 2017), 15–30. ↩

33. Žižek’s psychoanalytic explication of the cut re-situates our understanding of it with attention to the drive, rather than desire. He writes: “That is to say: the weird movement called “drive” is not driven by the “impossible” quest for the lost object; it is a push to enact “loss”—the gap, cut, distance— itself directly.” Consequently, my usage of “the cut” here does not refer to it as a proxy for the retrieval of a lost object, what might inhere in the desire for the legitimacy of black political action, for example. Rather, I invoke it to highlight how at the level of theory, interpretation, or reading, the analytic maneuver that lacerates and excises the non-productive and anti-social dimensions of black riots to retrieve its political and ethical legitimacy, repeat this constitutive cut in ways that draw attention to how the repetitious disciplining of the surplus of black riot becomes an ontic mode of enjoyment. See Žižek, *Parallax View*, 62. ↩

34. Here I am thinking alongside David Marriott’s idea that “Blackness would then be defined as a kind of primitive drive or energy thoroughly stripped of morality and restraint; containing within itself nothing but a drive that ceaselessly expends itself without any thought of limit or reserve.” David Marriott, *Whither Fanon? Studies in the Blackness of Being* (Stanford University Press, 2018), 125. ↩

35. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016). ↩

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Negative Evidence: The Critical-Clinical Diagnosis of Fatigue in Copjec's Kiarostami

by Rouzbeh Shadpey | Aporias, Issue 14.2 (Fall 2025)

ABSTRACT This literary essay examines and rehearses the conceptual challenge fatigue poses to diagnosis in its clinical and critical registers. Taking as its case study Joan Copjec's essay "Battle Fatigue: Kiarostami and Capitalism"—wherein fatigue, conceptually declined from Levinas' weariness of existence and the psychoanalytic death drive, is deployed as a theoretical lens through which to read Abbas Kiarostami's film *Taste of Cherry*—this essay argues that Copjec's diagnosis of Badii's unexplainable suicidality qua fatigue mirrors the clinic's insofar as both render fatigue into a diagnosis of exclusion predicated on forensic registers of negative evidence. For Copjec, fatigue is a symptom of Badii's unexplainable suicidality, not its cause—a logic that effectively reproduces the clinic's diagnosis of myalgic encephalomyelitis / chronic fatigue syndrome (ME/CFS) as the consequence of a suffering without proof. This results in Badii's erasure as a clinical subject of weariness at the behest of a socio-historico-political metaconcept of fatigue. Acknowledging that this trade-off constitutes the dialectical challenge of theorizing any illness, this essay nevertheless argues that fatigue presents a unique theoretical dilemma, insofar as historically and into the present, warring ideological factions have harmoniously eschewed patho-clinical frameworks for a conceptualization of fatigue as the essential condition of life under capitalist modernity. When fatigue is a symptom of everything—of mere living—it becomes a symptom of nothing: it loses its clinical and critical valence. Copjec's diagnosis, then, is not so much deficient as it is demonstrative: like Kiarostami's film(s), it begins with a lack of evidence only to end at an aporetic standstill: the impossibility of shoring up the evidence of lack. Like the slash that separates "ME" from "CFS," this essay argues that fatigue is not what slips through the crack between pre-existing categories of psyche and soma, but the very cut out of which these categories emerge, and upon whose negativity their fraught relation relies.

KEYWORDS Abbas Kiarostami, Joan Copjec, critical clinical, fatigue

Taste of Cherry, Abbas Kiarostami's 1997 Palme d'Or winning film, begets diagnosis. For at its heart is the question of a man's—its protagonist, Mr. Badii's—desire to die; a question which cannot go unanswered. Across sinuous roads etched into a derelict peri-urban landscape, the film depicts Badii as he drives in search of someone to throw "twenty shovels-full of dirt" on the hole in the ground where, come nightfall, he has decided to commit suicide. To his interlocutors, he provides neither motive nor explanation: just cash. The viewer is likewise kept in the dark. If the eponymous taste of cherries, a Turkish taxidermist informs us, drives life's prolongation, Kiarostami offers no clues as to what might cause this aroma to fade, its pleasures to dwindle. In *Taste of Cherry* the death drive is unaccounted for, so its omens are hallucinated everywhere.

The film thus warps its viewer's desire into that of the psychiatrist or the forensic expert.[1] (The difference between these positions is, in this case, purely fantasmatic. Like the rest of Kiarostami's oeuvre, *Taste of Cherry's* ending, along with Badii's fate, remain unresolved). It demands to be read as a suicide letter. Whether this suicide is successful or not matters little; either way the gaze is the same. The eye searches for evidence, while the ear listens for clues. Here the enigma is not so much the man's desire to die as the inexplicability underlying it. In a world ravaged by racial capital, death can be more charitable than the precarious latchings of life. But Badii, unlike the lumpen Iranian ethnic underclass that landscapes his drive, has been favored by God. He is an urban, educated, middle-class man living in Iran at the turn of the century. He is healthy. He drives a Land Rover.

What, then, is his *problem*? In her essay "Battle Fatigue: Kiarostami and Capitalism," Joan Copjec undertakes the question of Badii's suicidality with predictable acuity.[2] She proffers a humble diagnosis, suggesting we read Kiarostami's film through the Levinasian concept of fatigue:

> There exists a weariness which is a weariness of everything and everyone, and above all a weariness of oneself. What wearies then is not a particular form of our life . . . the weariness concerns existence itself [. . .] in weariness existence is something like the reminder of a commitment to exist [. . . and] the impossible refusal of this ultimate obligation. In weariness we want to escape existence itself, and not only one of its landscapes.[3]

Conceived during Levinas' time as a hostage in a Nazi labor camp, *Existence and Existents*—from which arise this passage and Levinas' theory of fatigue writ large—describes a relationship towards Being marred by weariness.[4] For the philosopher, it is existence as a whole, not merely one of its landscapes, that wearies—and weariness is the fundamental condition of a subject's coming into existence. This is an anti-capitalist and anti-ableist notion of fatigue, whereby fatigue is theorized beyond its usual horizon as the body's physiological or psychological depletion, and afforded the weight of presence, the authority of precedence.[5] Wielded in the face of capitalism's "every labor mystique,"[6] fatigue no longer constitutes an escape or pause from existence, but a return to it—albeit with a slight lag; an interval, gap, or short circuit that demagnetizes the present from the future and, for Copjec, turns it towards a past that never was.

Informed by psychoanalytic concepts of drive and repetition, Copjec's reading of fatigue suffuses Levinas' with the temporality of loss and mourning. Fatigue is equivocated with "helplessness" at the hands of a phantom grief borne by an "always already lost past . . . recast as a once actual past of which a people have been robbed or which they themselves squandered."[7] For these reasons and more, Copjec argues, *Taste of Cherry* is "legible through the concept of fatigue . . . [which] helps highlight the odd arduousness of the film's trajectory and permits us to examine both the contemporary issues at the film's centre—issues of war, capitalism and their inhospitable relation to fatigue—*and* the philosophical background informing Kiarostami's image-making practice."[8]

Yet the question nevertheless remains: why is Badii suicidal? For despite Copjec's thorough refraction of *Taste of Cherry* through the prism of fatigue, the expected, perhaps obvious conclusion—that Badii is suicidal *because he is tired*—never materializes. Instead, fatigue emerges throughout the essay as a metaconcept, distilled from the relation between the film's protagonist ("a cipher [through which] the film transforms the way we read the site of traumatic inscription"), the historical conjuncture to which he belongs, and the philosophy of Kiarostami's image-making practice.[9] In addition to its mimetic Kiarostamism, Copjec's instinct—to traffic psychological depth for psychic interiority, permeate the psyche to its socio-historical outside, and avoid the pitfalls of physiologically overdetermined concepts—is, of course, correct.[10] But it fails to produce a dialectic of fatigue, whereby fatigue encodes not only the ontological tiredness of Being or the historical one of laboring beings, but the bodily, debilitating experience of illness. That is to say, fatigue is deprived of *pathos*—afforded little to no footing in the body of the man whose drive has carefully staged the scene of its diagnosis. It is severed from the clinic.

To be sure, this dilemma is not Copjec's alone. In the process of poising the fraught dialectic between the individual dimension of illness and the sociohistorical environment that nurtures and hosts it, one is bound to teeter, however faintly, to one side or another of its balance.[11] While historically, leftist critique has emphasized social etiologies of illness while its reactionary counterpart champions the organic and individualistic realms, fatigue represents a rare bipartisan issue. Industrial capitalists and their neoliberal successors are here in agreement with Marxists: fatigue is a symptom of capitalist modernity.[12] Whether its preordained side-effect or the bodily obstacle to its full-fledged realization,[13] fatigue has and continues to be construed by both sides of the critical divide as both the metaphor and psychosomatic condition of capitalist modernity par excellence.[14] Everyone concurs: life under capitalism is objectively tiring, hence fatigue is simply the physiological and psychic condition of capitalist life.[15] Echoes of Levinas resound as fatigue and existence grow ever more enmeshed to the point of tautological entwinement.

Amidst such circular logic, what is the province of the clinic—if any—in the apprehension of the weary subject? What gets lost when fatigue is flattened to an amorphous ambient texture suffered by all alike: burned out white collar executives and un(der)paid organizers; bedbound long-haulers and antimaskers suffering from so-called "pandemic fatigue"?[16] When fatigue is a symptom of everything, of mere living, it becomes a symptom of nothing: it loses its clinical *and* critical valence. Paying this price most dearly are people with chronic fatigue, weariest of all. Like the elusive starlet Akiko in Kiarostami's *Like Someone in Love,* who does not go a day without being told she "looks like someone," which is to say no one, the subject of chronic fatigue is, in the clinic and beyond, equated into oblivion.[17] *Of course you're tired,* condescends the doctor to his patient, *everyone's tired!* Suffering is equalized to the point of disappearance by the very figures bestowed with the precious task of its discernment. Instead of galvanizing the individual's fatigue, that of the masses preempts it. Against the backdrop of universal fatigue, the weary subject cannot but fail to emerge—let alone as a subject of illness.[18]

In light of these preoccupations, this essay concentrates on a certain elision of the subject of weariness in Copjec's analysis of fatigue in *Taste of Cherry*. In so doing, it hopes to raise important issues concerning the clinical dimension of fatigue, and its relation to evidentiary registers of diagnosis. By drawing out the resonances between Copjec's psychoanalytic-cum-ontological diagnosis of fatigue and that of the (always already medico-legal) clinic, where chronic fatigue is a diagnosis of exclusion bound to negative evidence, the arguments in this essay trace a clinical counterpoint to the critical debates surrounding fatigue's ubiquity as symptom—of capitalism, modernity, life. As such, they strive beyond disciplinary conventions of staging the aporia between the critical and clinical in order to bridge, however imperfectly, the abyss separating these two registers.[19]

As in its sociohistorical diagnoses, the symptomatic essence of fatigue is axiomatic to medicine's smooth operation—and clinical thinking unspools when fatigue demands to be recognized as a cause of suffering, not merely its symptom. This reflection, then, is not a critique of Copjec's essay; it does not engage with the extensive breadth nor depth of her incisive argument. Rather, it biopsies a specific sliver of her analysis in order to examine the similar ways that clinical and critical diagnoses grapple with fatigue—and ultimately, betray it.

[*Day breaks, drive begins*]

*

Fatigue, for Copjec, is the symptom of Badii's *unexplainable* suicidality, not its cause.[20] Her diagnostic logic can be summarized as follows:

Badii, a man who lacks nothing—"there is no hint of anything lacking in his life"—is nevertheless suicidal.[21] Given the absence of any (particular) reason (organic or psychosocial) for his suffering, what afflicts Badii must be existence itself. That is to say, because he suffers from nothing (specific), Badii must be suffering from everything. Existence, and not one of its pathological landscapes, is diagnosed as the aetiology of Badii's suicidal symptom; a relation which, following Levinas, is secondarily interpreted *as* fatigue. Moreover, it is precisely this ontological nature of Levinasian fatigue that for Copjec brushes so seductively against the psychoanalytic concept of the drive. In her theorization of the death drive qua ontological fatigue, Alenka Zupančič deems this "fatigue as life's fundamental and objective affect."[22] If, as Freud posits in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the death drive is life's primary force; if the aim of all life is death, and life is but a series of detours—circuitous prolongations of the path—to death, then "the death drive is not so much a drive as an *ontological fatigue* . . . a fundamental *affect* of life."[23] Badii is thus a cipher in the dual sense of the word: not only does he encrypt an impersonal, “objective” fatigue (of a post-revolutionary Iran ravaged by war, capitalism, and a new authoritarian regime), he is a subject who lacks nothing specific, thus becoming, for Copjec, the subject of lack itself. The subject of the drive.

So Badii is tired because he is tired of living, not the other way around. Moreover, he is tired of living because he has nothing (else) to be tired of. Fatigue operates here as a spectral presence that can only be inferred; a pathology that can only be gleaned from the suffering of a man who does not present the requisite signs of wounding across his body or mind. *It is the consequence of a suffering without proof* (“no hint of anything lacking”). In an uncanny reversal, Copjec’s psychoanalytic and ontological diagnosis ends up mirroring its vulgar clinical counterpart, as both render fatigue into a diagnosis of exclusion. In medicine, a diagnosis of exclusion refers to one that does not result from any positive evidence, but from the elimination of all other possible diagnoses. It is a diagnosis based on what is deemed, in forensic terminology, *negative evidence*: “an oxymoronic term that legal professionals and scholars employ when the very absence of material evidence is used as evidence in its own right.”[24] The residual diagnosis when all bloodwork, imagery, and biopsies have returned normal. The clinical garb of one who suffers from—and thus of—*nothing*.

Myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome (ME/CFS) is one such diagnosis, bestowed upon the patient whose “primary symptom” is “severe, disabling” fatigue which has lasted “for at least six months,” is “present more than 50 percent of the time,” and *cannot* be explained by “an established medical condition” or a current diagnosis of “schizophrenia, manic-depressive illness, substance abuse, eating disorder, or proven organic brain disease.”[25] That ME/CFS is a diagnosis of exclusion has everything to do with the fraught understanding of fatigue that pervades our clinical and theoretical imaginaries. Its aporia highlights the short-circuiting of clinical logic when fatigue, a symptom of practically all bodily disease processes and thus the *symptom par excellence*,[26] appears “on its own,” untethered from aetiological anchoring. To be clear, this is irreducible to the oft-deployed banal framework of medically unexplained symptom (MUS), which rhetorically paints over fatigue’s constitutional threat to clinical logic with the faux humility of a medical science self-aware of its own epistemic limits. For fatigue’s consistent resistance to biomedicalization seems to suggest that it is not the horizon of a medicine yet to come, but what gives the lie to Western medicine’s metaphysics altogether.

Writing about the case of functional pain within the colonial clinic—that is, pain without an identifiable organic etiology—Frantz Fanon remarked that “what [the North African] patient is unaware of is that there is *an exacting medical philosophy*, and that he has flouted this philosophy.”[27] The philosophy in question, which remains as true today as it did at the time of Fanon’s writing in 1952: “Medical thinking proceeds from the symptom to the lesion.”[28] If Fanon could rightly make this claim about pain, then its implications for fatigue are that much more severe. For as we have said, fatigue is not only a symptom, but an ursymptom whose very essence is its belatedness, which is to say, its nature as evidence (of some underlying process, physiological or pathological).[29] When fatigue appears on the clinical stage, one searches for its cause, its lesion. When this cause is absent—when fatigue *is* the lesion—clinical thinking unravels. In the words of Roland Barthes, “What is the place of a lesion of the (total) body in the (socially) recognized table of illnesses? Is weariness an illness or not? Is it a nosological reality?”[30]

It is important to note that this tension Fanon evokes between the symptom and its lesion is but a restaging of that much older Cartesian drama between the body and the mind, upon which all science hinges. The irony then, with a diagnostic entity such as ME/CFS, is that it encapsulates the entire Cartesian legacy within its signifier: ME is an anato-pathophysiological denomination for brain inflammation connoting organic disease; CFS is a tautological string of signifiers connoting subjective illness; and the slash that separates them is none other than the cut, the negativity against and around which the organic body and the psychological mind take shape. This, I want to posit, is the proper site of fatigue: neither the organic body (ME) nor the psychological mind (CFS) but *the negative cut, symbolized by the slash* (/), around whose absence body and mind congeal as distinct conceptual entities.

To belabor this point, fatigue is not what slips through the crack between pre-existing categories of psyche and soma—hypostatized clinically as organic disorders and mental illnesses—but the very cut out of which these categories emerge, and upon whose negativity their fraught relation relies. Hence Copjec and Zupančič's invaluable insight to theorize fatigue via the drive, the psychoanalytic concept that most gainfully avails this negative space to thought. In this they are not alone: Kiarostami, too, is interested in the drive, the lack it endlessly encircles. His characters, his stories—always driving, heading nowhere. In the director's own words: "When we tell a story, we tell but one story, and each member of the audience, with a peculiar capacity to imagine things, hears but one story. But when we say nothing, it's as if we said a great number of things . . . It's necessary to envision an unfinished and incomplete cinema so that the spectator can intervene and fill the void, the lacks."[31]

In her analysis of *Taste of Cherry,* Copjec does not fall for Kiarostami's bait; her attunement to desire proscribes her such vanities as filling the void. Instead, she renders it legible, dons it a name: *fatigue.* As such, hers is not yet another interpretation of the film, but its illumination as negative evidence.

Or is it the negativity of evidence tout court that is here being evinced? Per Jean-Luc Nancy, whose meditation on Kiarostami's work aptly carries the title *The Evidence of the Film*, this is precisely evidence's essence: "It is [not] an unveiling, because evidence always keeps a secret or an essential reserve: the reserve of its very light, and where it comes from."[32] To see the image, one must become blind to the light carrying it, the light it carries. Similarly, the emergence of fatigue in

Taste of Cherry becomes for Copjec contingent on the effacement of the subject that vehicles it. As if Badii's suffering can only become legible as fatigue once he's been subjected to one of Kiarostami's signature cosmic long shots. As if his fatigue can only be witnessed once, far from sight and reduced to pixelated size, he's been swallowed whole by the influx of night's negative space within the frame.

But can it be otherwise? Is Copjec's telescoping of fatigue in order to better grasp it not ultimately in faithful deference to the phenomenon she is studying? For it remains one of fatigue's paradoxes that its best witness is an absent one. Far from the unspectacular sight of the weary man, unperturbed by the lack of material traces leftover by fatigue in the empirical field, the absent witness alone becomes capable of truly *seeing* fatigue. Like Saint Louis, whose martyrdom at the hands of fatigue could only be attested to by Joinville, who lay far from the dying king at the moment of his expiry, Badii's fatigue most readily crystallizes once he's removed from sight. As Jean-Louis Chrétien remarks in the case of Saint Louis:

> But what do we see when we see someone die of fatigue? Do we see fatigue in this sight, in the sight of someone who can no longer [*qui n'en peut plus*] tolerate the extenuation of his potential, and disappear? Must we be there where fatigue, at the peak of its presence, makes one cede to it and absent themself—*vita concedere*, as said Tacite—to see, to know fatigue? But what is there to see, and can we be present there?[33]

Whether in *Taste of Cherry* or in the clinic, fatigue is nowhere to be found. Like much affliction, it lies beyond the pale of empirical scrutiny. But this, Chrétien crucially remarks, is not limited to the act of witnessing another's fatigue: it applies to the subject of fatigue themself. "[I]s [fatigue] not in and of itself . . . a presence to that which we are not present yet still or already attest to?"[34] In the interval of fatigue—the lag yawned open between a subject and its being, a subject always already late to itself—the inevitability and futility of witness are borne out. For the weary subject not only struggles to remain alert to the world that surrounds them; they also struggle to remain present to themself, their fatigue. Fatigue undoes the subjectivity required for its experience. It voids its beholder's testimony, rendering them an impossible witness to their own suffering.

At this stage in Badii's case—and who would dare refuse *Taste of Cherry* the scientifico-legal status of the case study—we find ourselves in a difficult position.[35] With no witness and no body (of evidence), how can we hope to prove Badii's fatigue beyond the processual exclusion rehearsed by critical and clinical diagnoses alike? Indeed, has this not been precisely the purview of this text—to *prove*—to demonstrate that this affliction called *fatigue* has a place in the body of the subject that struggles to entrap and exude it; that it need not be inferred from the extenuation of a man who has everything and suffers from nothing; that it can be allotted the dignity of cause; be reason enough to want to die; be named without first surveying the entire manual of psychiatric and organic diagnoses, one by one ruling each out, sifting through the evidence until all that is left is the lack of evidence itself?

What would it require to discern between the lack of evidence and the evidence of lack? What would be necessary to no longer consider fatigue as the refuse of mind-body dualism, but its generative cut? These are questions that pertain to possibility: the possibility of *naming what kills us*.[36] Their elaboration demands we think fatigue as a form of what Danielle Collobert called "the unrealizable and constant suicide by little pieces, the slow flame of that burn."[37] To wrest fatigue from its bind as "the most modest of misfortunes" and declare its murder,[38] for "one does not die alone," warns Collobert, "one is killed."[39]

Fatigue has and continues to extinguish many lives in the shadow of clinical and forensic diagnoses (as well as psychoanalytic and philosophical ones, as we have seen). If there's been a conscientious effort throughout this discussion not to neatly differentiate between these dual registers—of medicine and law—it is not for the sake of metaphorical effect, but simply because the clinic is also a legal forum when a patient's affliction is put on trial. Every anamnesis a testimony, every ailing body a body of evidence when the patient's suffering must, a priori, be proved.

What, then, can it possibly entail to prove one's fatigue? The prompt alone inspires an absurd, Kafkaesque scene: that of a weary man being put on trial. In the spirit of *Taste of Cherry,* we end this piece with a coda of its own. A change in the register of the text, the texture of its grain. The (re)appearance of the disappeared. The passing of the cold season. But first, *lights*.

[*Night falls, page goes dark*]

*

Having lain down to sleep in a makeshift grave, the man is awoken at the break of dawn by the kiss of a pebble ricocheting off his forehead. The Turkish taxidermist who flung the projectile emits a faint sigh of relief; his duty fulfilled, he collects his bounty from the glove compartment of the lone car parked on the side of the road, and leaves. Meanwhile, an acquaintance of the man—his spouse, daughter or friend—having remarked his absence, the note he did or didn't leave behind on the desk by the window of his apartment, had called the authorities. Sometime between the taxidermist's departure and the man's re-entry into consciousness, the uniforms arrive on site, apprehend the man, and bring him into custody. Cue the inexhaustible cycle of evaluations: mental state, organs, faith, law-abiding capacities—all thoroughly scrutinized, re-scrutinized. Reports loftily drafted, re-drafted. Expert diagnosticians from across the capital summoned to opine on the man's case; some deem him criminal, others claim he is insane. A rare few, who believe in the non-contradictory nature of these two states, pronounce him both. Yet always the question, why? *And always the man's answer,* because I'm tired.

And every time the injunction, prove it. *To which the man, weary, can only ever reply,* I would, were I not too tired. *At which point the cycle begins anew, carving out its missing object through the movement of repetition. Such is the trial of fatigue.*

Notes

1. The effect is akin to the psychological autopsy documented in suicidology literature, whereby the mental state of the subject who has committed suicide is investigated, speculated upon, and retroactively diagnosed. For a critical discussion of this, see China Mills, "'Dead People Don't Claim': A Psychopolitical Autopsy of UK Austerity Suicides," *Critical Social Policy* 38, no. 2 (2018): 302–22. For a discussion of Mills in the context of self-immolation, see Timothy DeMay, "Occupations: A Repertoire of Experimental Political and Artistic Practices" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2022): 102–5. ↩

2. Joan Copjec, "Battle Fatigue: Kiarostami and Capitalism," in *Lacan Contra Foucault*, ed. Nadia Bou Ali and Rohit Goel (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018). ↩

3. Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), 24–25. Cited in Copjec, "Battle Fatigue," 140. ↩

4. Throughout this text, I use the terms *weariness, tiredness* and *fatigue* interchangeably. While historicizations of these concepts differ, along with their contemporary disciplinary affiliations (weariness being an analytic in literary humanities, while fatigue predominates in scientific labor management and the clinic), I equivocate them precisely in the spirit of this essay's argument on the porousness of the critical-clinical divide in fatigue. As historicizations of fatigue methodically repent, fatigue is a protean and ambiguous concept. This essay yields to the slipperiness of its signifier. For a theory of the critical-clinical, see Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical.*, trans. Michael A. Greco and Daniel W. Smith (University Of Minnesota Press, 1997). For recent historizations of fatigue-related concepts, see Anna Katharina Schaffner, *Exhaustion* (Columbia University Press, 2016); Georges Vigarello, *A History of Fatigue: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. Nancy Erber (Polity, 2022); Philippe Zawieja, ed., *Dictionnaire de La Fatigue* (Librairie Droz, 2016). ↩

5. Accordingly, Jonathan Sterne adduces Levinas's theory of fatigue as an example of what he deems a "nondepletionist" model of fatigue. In the final chapter of *Diminished Faculties,* Sterne outlines a crip theory of fatigue that departs from depletionist models—of fatigue qua impairment of normative, able-bodied, energetic subjects—towards a political phenomenology of fatigue as presence. While I share Sterne's concerns about the ableist and capitalist underpinnings of depletionist models, our theoretical horizons differ insofar as I seek less to redeem fatigue as presence than to insist on its negativity. Nevertheless, Sterne's contribution remains invaluable within "the world of

disability theory and activism, {where} fatigue is not as well understood as one might expect." I remain grateful for the all too brief yet infinite conversation we shared. See Jonathan Sterne, "There Are Never Enough Spoons," in *Diminished Faculties: A Political Phenomenology of Impairment* (Duke University Press, 2021), 157–91; Rouzbeh Shadpey, "At the Mercy of Limitless Loss: Physiological Aneconomies of Chronic Fatigue," Weird Economies, January 15, 2024, https://weirdeconomies.com/contributions/at-the-mercy-of-limitless-loss. ↩

6. Levinas, *Existence and Existents,* 33. Cited in Copjec, "Battle Fatigue," 144. ↩

7. Copjec, "Battle Fatigue," 148–9. ↩

8. Copjec, "Battle Fatigue," 140. ↩

9. Copjec, "Battle Fatigue," 140. ↩

10. This last point constitutes Copjec's deft critique of Jonathan Crary's conceptualization of sleep in his oft-cited *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. ↩

11. For a recent, beautiful display of funambulism along this tightrope, see Hannah Proctor, *Burnout* (Verso Books, 2024). ↩

12. The most comprehensive account of the scientific emergence of fatigue at the dawn of industrial capitalism remains Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (Basic Books, 1990). ↩

13. This double-sidedness explains how, in the early twentieth century, Josephine Goldmark and other labor advocates were able to mobilize the fatigue research of industrial physiologists against the industrial managers whom it initially benefited in order to secure workers rights in the name of fatigue's negative impact on efficiency. See Josephine Goldmark, *Fatigue and Efficiency: A Study in Industry* (Charities Publication, 1912). ↩

14. I am perhaps a little partial here: the contest for the (metaphoric) illness par excellence of capitalist modernity is far from being a one-man race. Recent compelling cases have been drawn for hypochondria, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and autism—to name but a few. See Ghalya Saadawi, "Critical Incision: Hypochondria, Autotheory, and the Health-Illness Dialectic," *PhiloSOPHIA* 12, no. 1–2 (2022): 57–83,https://doi.org/10.1353/phi.2022.0011 < https://doi.org/10.1353/phi.2022.0011> ; Jennifer L. Fleissner, "Obsessional Modernity: The 'Institutionalization of Doubt,'" *Critical Inquiry* 34, no. 1 (September 2007): 106–34,https://doi.org/10.1086/526089 < https://doi.org/10.1086/526089> ; Franco Bifo Berardi, *The Third Unconscious* (Verso Books, 2021). ↩

15. Most surprising is how even the scientific and biomedical fields responsible for the edification and maintenance of the modern concept of fatigue partake in this view. In her forthcoming manuscript on myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome (ME/CFS), Emily Rogers formulates this under the rubric of "making fatigue normal," whereupon medical and labor sciences, throughout the twentieth century, together cemented the hegemonic assumption of fatigue as a "normal side-effect" of capitalist

conditions of labor. Per Roger, and as I highlight in this text, this sociohistorical normalization of fatigue—rooted in the so-called difficulty of parsing "pathological" fatigue from "everyday tiredness"—is inextricable from, and a necessary condition to ME/CFS's dismissal as a medical condition (or a pathological framework of fatigue tout court). This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the colloquial expression, "Am I sick or just tired?" where illness and fatigue are understood to be mutually exclusive. ↩

16. From its early nineteenth-century conceptualization as neurasthenia—considered to be a nervous maladaptation to the accelerating pace of modernity—the purported social etiology of fatigue syndromes has estranged them from the clinic. In the 1990s, academic and popular theories of fatigue syndromes qua mass hysterical contagion, vehicled most famously by the likes of Elaine Showalter and Edward Shorter, were used to discredit the clinical relevance of intractable forms of fatigue. While these still loom large in the clinical imaginary (especially in its understanding of chronic fatigue as a psychosomatic condition), today it is the ubiquitous and banal discourse of burnout that drives fatigue's generalization. No longer the adverse effects of mass media on unconscious feminine minds, but the internalized norms of performance society, coupled with the "limitless possibilities" of the white bourgeois subject, now condition this "epidemic" of fatigue. See Elaine Showalter, *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media* (Columbia University Press, 1997); Edward Shorter, *From Paralysis to Fatigue* (Free Press, 1993); Alain Ehrenberg, *La Fatigue d'Être Soi : Dépression et Société* (Odile Jacob, 1998); Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society* (Stanford University Press, 2015). ↩

17. "The oblique reference to someone cancels itself out, or better said, it assigns to resemblance a peculiar intransitive sense. For what it says about Akiko is that she resembles no one, no one we can point to… least of all herself. . . . She resembles herself insofar as she is not identical to herself. She holds together as a subject only on the condition that she is irreducible to a set of traits that objectify her." Joan Copjec, "A Cinema of Subtraction," online lecture, posted May 2024, by ZRC SAZU, YouTube, 42:45, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g3i7LHzp_6U&t=3660s < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g3i7LHzp_6U&t=3660s> . ↩

18. This bears an interesting resonance with another conceptual forebear of fatigue, *acedia*. Among the desert ascetics of the third and fourth centuries from which the concept derives, the term *adiaphoria*—literally meaning "not different"—was used to refer to the collapsed distinction between humans, animals, and environment ushered by desert life. This connotation of spatial indifference is further complemented by an affective understanding of indifference as lack of will and motivation. See Rikus Van Eeden, "Fatigue and Exhaustion: A Philosophical Topography" (PhD Diss., KU Leuven, 2024): 89. ↩

19. As exemplified by the following disclaimer in one sociological study of exhaustion: "This approach is strictly sociological. It leaves it up to doctors and psychotherapists to provide answers to the question of what actually ails people and why, and especially to make proposals about how they should be helped." But do these sociological analyses not ultimately bleed into the clinic? Indeed, how must we understand the divide between the critical and clinical portended by such disclaimers, when clinicians

regularly write off patients with debilitating forms of chronic fatigue as being merely burned out? Do historical and contemporary theories of fatigue's social etiology not bleed into and shape the clinic precisely where fatigue is at its severest form? Ulrich Bröckling, "Rechargeable Man in a Hamster Wheel World: Contours of a Trendsetting Illness," in *Burnout, Fatigue, Exhaustion: An Interdisciplinary Perspective on a Modern Affliction*, ed. Sighard Neckel, Anna Katharina Schaffner, and Greta Wagner (Springer International Publishing, 2017), 219. ↩

20. *Symptom* is not employed here in its psychoanalytic sense—as latent-meaning to be hyperbolized, tended to, enjoyed—or in its derivative literary sense, but in its clinical, semiotic sense—as a sign of an underlying disorder. ↩

21. Copjec, "Battle Fatigue," 140. ↩

22. Zupančič was led to make the connection between the Freudian death drive and fatigue upon being invited to speak at the Pembroke Research Seminar in 2015–2016. Led by Copjec herself, fatigue was the seminar's theme. ↩

23. Zupančič, *What Is Sex?*, 97. ↩

24. Eyal Weizman, *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability* (Zone Books, 2017), 18. ↩

25. Oxford Criteria for Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. See Joseph R. Yancey and Sarah M. Thomas, "Chronic Fatigue Syndrome: Diagnosis and Treatment," *American Family Physician* 86, no. 8 (October 15, 2012): 741–46,https://www.aafp.org/pubs/afp/issues/2012/1015/p741.html < https://www.aafp.org/pubs/afp/issues/2012/1015/p741.html> . ↩

26. I reiterate that *symptom* here is to be understood clinically, not psychoanalytically. For if chronic fatigue is the clinical symptom par excellence, its symptomatic nature within psychoanalysis remains contested on the basis of the early Freudian theory of the actual neuroses (to which neurasthenia belonged), which postulated the somatic symptom as excess drive jettisoned through the body without symbolic mediation. See Rouzbeh Shadpey, "In Defense of Indefensible Expressions: On the Pure Complaint of Chronic Fatigue," *Parapraxis*, July 7, 2025,https://www.parapraxismagazine.com/articles/in-defense-of-indefensible-expressions < https://www.parapraxismagazine.com/articles/in-defense-of-indefensible-expressions> . ↩

27. Frantz Fanon, "The 'North African Syndrome,'" in *Toward the African Revolution* (Grove Press, 1969), 8 (emphasis mine). ↩

28. Fanon, "The 'North African Syndrome,'" 8. ↩

29. While the Levinasian concept of fatigue theoretically reverses this logic by positing fatigue as the cause, not the consequence, of action, it is interesting to note how this logic nevertheless clinically and critically plays out in reverse. ↩

30. Roland Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977–1978)* (Columbia University Press, 2005), 17. ↩

31. As cited in Hamish Ford, “Driving into the Void: Kiarostami’s Taste of Cherry,” *Journal of Humanistics and Social Sciences* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–27. ↩

32. *"Ce {l’évidence} n’est pas non plus un dévoilement, car l’évidence garde toujours un secret ou une réserve essentielle: la réserve de sa lumière même, et d’où elle provient."* Jean-Luc Nancy, *L’évidence Du Film: Abbas Kiarostami* (Yves Gevaert Éditeur, 2007), 43 (translation my own). ↩

33. "*Mais que voit-on en voyant quelqu’un mourir de fatigue? Est-ce qu’on voit la fatigue en voyant cela, en voyant celui qui n’en peut plus n’en pouvoir plus même de cette exténuation de son pouvoir, et disparaître? Faudrait-il y être, pour voir, pour savoir la fatigue là où, au comble de sa présence, elle fait qu’on lui cède et qu’on s’absente,* vita concedere, *comme dit Tacite? Mais y a t-il à voir, et peut-on y être?*" Jean-Louis Chrétien, *De La Fatigue* (Les Éditions de Minuit, 1996), 22 (translation my own). ↩

34. "*Et surtout, n’est-elle {la fatigue} pas elle-même cela . . . une présence à ce à quoi l’on n’est pas présent de façon que pourtant l’on en témoigne encore ou déjà?*" Chrétien, *De La Fatigue,* 23. ↩

35. As Lauren Berlant remarks, “The case represents a problem-event that has animated some kind of judgment. Any enigma could do—a symptom, a crime, a causal variable, a situation, a stranger, or any irritating obstacle to clarity.” Fittingly, *Taste of Cherry*’s enigma is at once all of these. See Lauren Berlant, “On the Case,” *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (June 2007): 663, https://doi.org/10.1086/521564 < https://doi.org/10.1086/521564> . ↩

36. My gratitude extends to Mayra A. Rodríguez Castro for providing this prompt and introducing me to Collobert’s work. ↩

37. Danielle Collobert, *Murder*, trans. Nathanaël (Litmus Press, 2013), 9. ↩

38. Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation,* trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xx. ↩

39. Collobert, *Murder,* 96. ↩

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Article details

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Introduction – Digital Platforms and Agency

by Reed Van Schenck and Elaine Venter | Digital Platforms and Agency, Issue 14.2 (Fall 2025)

ABSTRACT This piece introduces a special section on digital platforms and agency. It unpacks the tension between, on the one hand, the imposition of digital platforms upon cultures by immensely-powerful technology companies, and on the other hand, the emergence of possibilities as people work, play, and express themselves on platforms. Cultural studies, which has always concerned itself with structure, culture, and agency, is well-positioned to work through this tension in order to orient scholars of platform studies toward radical critique and political action. The introduction situates the invited works of "Digital Platforms and Agency" in this context, elaborates upon cultural studies' charge toward the emerging field of platform studies, and summarizes the individual and collective contributions of the special section authors.

KEYWORDS agency, digital media, platform studies, platformization, technology

There is unavoidable tension between the two concepts which define this special section: *digital platforms* and *agency*. Popular discourse surrounding existing, evolving, and emerging platforms spin around fears of lost, stolen, or obsolete human agency. Supposedly, algorithms know us better than we do, social media both amplifies and subverts our speech, artificial intelligence has stolen our jobs, and apps have invaded our analog lives from dating to tourism. Likewise, academic discussions of platforms risk positing the figure of the "Cultural Dupe," the feckless human automaton beholden to social, economic, and technical structures. By rejecting the Cultural Dupe while paying heed to those structures, the field of cultural studies has emerged as a platform for radically reflexive critique. As such, not only does the emerging interdisciplinary "platform studies" field have something to give cultural studies, cultural studies is an especially generative frame of reference from which to do platform studies. The purpose of this special section of *Lateral* is to bring together established and emerging scholars working with and through tensions that mold agents and agency on and of digital platforms and platform studies through and with cultural studies.

This special section does not seek hasty resolutions to shore up the comfort of our critical distance. We cannot pretend that platforms do not intimately weave themselves into the fabric of our lives. Instead, these authors have sat with the tension between platforms and agency as a generative locus for deeper analysis and criticism. Platforms are more than mere conduits for our content. They actively moderate, shape, amplify, diminish, and monetize user-generated content, profiles, and data. The proliferation and interconnection of platforms, a dynamic called "platformization,"[1] scales this mediation to local, national, and global levels. And yet, platforms enjoy brand appeal and, in some contexts, legal protections as neutral intermediaries, imparting an illusory sense of control to users. This "illusion of immediacy," or an appearance of seamlessness co-created through user customization and developer manipulation, unifies human and non-human actors into a socio-technical system.[2] In this way, platform cultures appear as natural extensions of the human. In this paradoxical way, digital platforms are constitutive of but ever-dependent upon the agential expressions of human users.

That platforms strive for their own mystification is manifest in how the interdisciplinary subfield of platform studies approaches platforms as functions. The field defines platforms as user-centered, if not user-friendly, mediators that come into focus predominantly through their interaction with human users. For instance, it is fundamental that platforms do not produce the bulk of the content that users encounter but rather "host, organize, and circulate users' shared content or social interactions for them."[3] Platforms constitute "users" insofar as users customize platforms through gestures of agency curated by platform institutions and infrastructures. Often employing metaphors endemic to the tech industry, such as "The Stack"[4] or notions of platform as layered system,[5] the dominant wisdom of platform studies has situated human agency as both input and output to the platform, ultimately subordinate to digital architectures.

Cultural studies has much to offer platform studies in order to situate tensions across humanity, technology, and non-human agents. Scholars across feminist media studies, game studies, Black digital studies and beyond have challenged the hegemonic approach to platform studies, which risks reducing the human to an abstract object to whom axes of social difference such as race, gender, and disability are epiphenomenal. Platform studies risks naturalizing Western platform capitalism as the inevitable background, origin, and destination of all digital platforms and the cultures they host.[6] Such presumptions render invisible platforms and agents whose interactions fail to achieve commercially-recognized success, possibly undermining platform studies' efforts to invigorate alternate modes of systematizing digital technology and cultures. By extension, platform studies can take for granted the whiteness of its audiences.[7] Resultantly, calls for attention to social difference *as* infrastructure are met with belittlement by dismissing "relationality" as a vector of technology which the above definitions of "platform" demonstrate it to be. Calls to conceptually separate human relations from technical relations belie a desire for unmarked epistemology that can be easily extracted by mammoth technology companies in concert with, rather than in contradiction with, their business model and marketing techniques. Resultantly, as Audrey Anable writes, the field "tends to reproduce histories and analyses that ignore the complicated differences and relationships between technologies as things and bodies as things—as systems differently encoded by race, ability, gender, class, ethnicity, nationality, and sexuality."[8]

This special section advances these critiques of platform studies by considering social relationality as a constitutive component of digital platforms, rather than a disregardable array of surface-level specifications. What happens to our understanding of the platform if agency appears not as a contained and individuated "possession" of the ideal user, but rather as flows of capacity that constitutively shape digital infrastructure and culture? In pursuit of this question, this section follows the lead of Beth Coleman who considers agency, or degrees of presence and will, as an ethical fulcrum that can orient scholars away from disempowering structures and toward liberatory practices, namely appropriating race as technology.[9] For Coleman, agency is layered and variable, capable of being amplified or diminished from without but not completely squandered. Her conception of agency is formally similar to the functionalist notion of platforms in that both offer a framework to understand how subjects appear as (in)capacious and act upon their ethical inclinations through digital infrastructures. However, the critical difference in Coleman's configuration is that it is the vector of social difference, race, which empowers oppositional work via digital platforms, not the other way around. "The mechanism of race" is not a self-contained object that suddenly appears to subvert pre-existing digital agencies but rather an "array of procedures" which incline toward outcomes such as the disenfranchisement of Black and Indigenous peoples, but can and must be manipulated at all levels of access to avoid such outcomes and, more critically, to engineer radical, subversive, and transformative practice.

Cultivated in the critical soil of cultural studies, a platform studies that theorizes technology beginning with difference can disrupt the protocols of platformization, as Ruha Benjamin does through her critique of design thinking as a technique for diminishing "other forms of generic human activity."[10] To recenter vectors of difference, which hegemonic digital platforms obfuscate, is a crucial step toward generating imaginations and capabilities for liberation. Coleman's work functions as an epistemic platform for scholars approaching human agency as a starting point to "theorize technology beginning with difference," in Neda Atanasoski's and

Kalindi Vora's words.[11] For example, scholars like Bo Ruberg, Aimi Hamraie, and moira williams elucidate how platforms, even those encoded as tools for corporate dominance, bring agential difference into view because social stratification engenders creative appropriations of platform affordances employed by marginalized communities to exercise oppositional agencies.[12] Even though the customizability of platforms is routinely overstated for the sake of bolstering platform capitalism, the fact that communities for whom digital platforms were not designed still make themselves to appear as subjects on/of the platform, testifies to the fluid relationship between platforms, agencies, and the tension between. The ubiquity of platforms and the universal ambitions of platform capitalism render perceptible the ways that agencies contradict and derive, interrupting the mass individual whose dominance retrenches white, abled, cis-hetero-masculinity as default.

The papers presented in this special section contribute to the cultivation of a platform studies rooted in the critical, careful ethos of cultural studies.

Nina Medvedeva's "The Platform-Enabled Durability of Colonial Racial Capitalism in Washington DC's Wards 7 and 8 < https://csalateral.org/section/digital-platforms-agency/platform-enabled-durabilitycolonial-racial-capitalism-washington-dc-wards-7-8-medvedeva/> " investigates the promises and pitfalls of Black Airbnb hosts' resistance to racist placemaking in a context marked by profound platformized and spatialized precarity.

Zari Taylor's and Kiara Childs' "Searching for Blackness: #BlackGirlPilates and Racialized Hashtags as Agentic Praxis on TikTok < https://csalateral.org/section/digital-platforms-agency/searching-for-blackness-black-girl-pilates-racialized-hashtags-tiktok-taylor-childs/> " explores how Black TikTok users disrupt the whitening of the algorithm by strategically searching for content which centers their experiences.

Nuno Atalaia's and Marianne Gunderson's "Alexa's Monstrous Agency: The Horror of the Digital Voice Assistant < https://csalateral.org/section/digital-platforms-agency/alexas-monstrous-agency-horror-digital-voice-assistant-atalaia-gunderson/> " investigates how popular and corporate representations of the ubiquitous presence of digital voice assistants reflect emerging anxieties surrounding data extraction and the penetrability of daily life.

Ziyin Li's "The Platformized Matchmaking Labor: What Do Prosumers Do in Dating Apps < https://csalateral.org/section/digital-platforms-agency/platformized-matchmaking-labor-prosumers-dating-apps-li-wiehn/> " develops the field's understanding of platform-mediated intimacy work by detailing the collusion of Chinese traditional matchmaking practices within the increasingly appified dating landscape.

Kelsey Cummings' "'Help Them Keep Doing What They're Doing': Intersections of Agency, Affect, and Capital in the Twitch Subscription System < https://csalateral.org/section/digital-platforms-agency/help-them-keep-doing-what-theyre-doing-intersections-of-agency-affect-and-capital-in-the-twitch-subscription-system-cummings/> " interrogates the mobilization and obfuscation of affective, intimate labor through the sociotechnical system of the live-streaming platform Twitch.

Nathalie Schäfer's "Call the (Bot-) Police: User-Led Platform Governance of (In)Authenticity on Instagram < https://csalateral.org/section/digital-platforms-agency/call-the-bot-police-user-led-platform-governance-of-inauthenticity-on-instagram/> " interrogates how Instagram users enroll themselves as custodians of authenticity through techniques of digital vigilantism practiced by anti-botting accounts.

E. Chebrolu's "Mind the Gab: A Racial Rhetorical Criticism of the Complaint Against Content Moderation < https://csalateral.org/section/digital-platforms-agency/mind-the-gab-racial-rhetorical-criticism-alt-tech-big-tech-content-moderation-chebrolu/> " plumbs the reactionary "alt-tech" social media platform Gab to excavate the racist conceits underpinning platforms which brand themselves according to a fantasy of free speech.

Finally, Maria Bose's "Digital Agents: The New Politics of Recognition in Contemporary 'Post-Race' Fiction < https://csalateral.org/section/digital-platforms-agency/digital-agents-new-politics-recognition-contemporary-post-race-fiction-bose/> " takes the context of Apple's Face ID as a starting point to investigate the challenges posed to postracial rhetorics within recent novels of ethnicity.

Notes

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11. Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora, *Surrogate Humanity: Race, Robots, and the Politics of Technological Futures* (Duke University Press, 2019), 24. ↩

12. Bo Ruberg, “After Agency: The Queer Posthumanism of Video Games That Cannot Be Played.” *Convergence* 28, no. 2 (2022): 413–30, https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565221094257 < https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565221094257> ; Aimi Hamraie and moira williams, “Remote Access: A Crip Nightlife Party,” *Lateral* 12, no. 1 (2023): https://doi.org/10.25158/L12.1.7 < https://doi.org/10.25158/L12.1.7> . ↩

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The Platform-Enabled Durability of Colonial Racial Capitalism in Washington DC's Wards 7 and 8

by Nina Medvedeva | Digital Platforms and Agency, Issue 14.2 (Fall 2025)

ABSTRACT This article explores how platforms reinforce structures of racism and coloniality in Washington DC's majority-Black Ward 7 and Ward 8. Drawing on ethnographic research with Black hosts who short-term rent on Airbnb, I follow how Black residents' imaginaries of space are superseded by platform-enabled white users' imaginaries through Airbnb's "Location" star ratings. This rating draws down hosts' overall ratings based on guests' racist experiences of feeling "unsafe" in majority-Black working-class neighborhoods—resulting in lower visibility on Airbnb's app, decreased bookings, and financial losses. Using a geopolitical conception of racism on platforms which I call the Colonial Racial Capitalist Stack (CRCStack), I show how these ratings enable platform-mediated conceptions of space and land that discursively reinforce racist depictions of Wards 7 and 8. I read Benjamin Bratton's design concept of "the Stack" through Ruha Benjamin's analytic of "discriminatory design" to argue that platforms are key sites for the exploitation and ongoing dispossession of land and labor under systems of racism, settler and franchise colonialisms, and capitalism across a variety of historical and geographical contexts, as described by Koshy, et. al. Through an exploration of the Stack's layers (User/Interface/Address, City/Cloud, and Earth), I argue that the CRCStack makes racism, as a social technology, more durable by entrenching as a racialized geopolitical ordering of the world into the life worlds of Black people living in Wards 7 and 8. Durability is a key metric by which platforms are measured. Platforms that are unable to cultivate durability—whether by cultivating a loyal user community, harnessing the network effect, or technological necessity—are quickly replaced by other platforms. Reading technology as a racializing and racialized tool helps us understand how racism, as a system, is innovated and entrenched through technological means. I demonstrate how platforms act as the latest technological innovation created to extend the durability of existing systems of racialization and colonization that are required for racial capitalist economies to function. I theorize how racism on the CRCStack operates at multiple overlapping layers, focusing specifically on how discrimination on Airbnb impacts users, neighborhoods, cities, and the wider real estate market. In doing so, I not only explore how platform-enabled racism restricts Black residents' spatial imaginaries but also trace how Black hosts push back against the CRCStack through Airbnb Support complaints, grassroots practices of negotiation with racist guests, and social movement actions in conjunction with state authorities. I conclude by thinking through what dismantling the CRCStack would require for platform corporations like Airbnb, its users, and city residents.

KEYWORDS Airbnb, colonialism, platform studies, racial capitalism

Introduction

In 2016, Airbnb released a one-minute video profiling users who rented their homes in Washington DC's Wards 7 and 8. Airbnb created this video in response to a looming regulatory debate over whether short-term rental companies like it are beneficial to cities, or whether they are detrimental for taking away housing from long-term residents and promoting unregulated tourism. Airbnb collaborated with hosts to create video ads, news quotes, lobbying campaigns, grassroots canvasses, and rallies to fight back against regulations. Hosts in the aforementioned video were part of Airbnb Action, an advocacy group developed by Airbnb after advocacy by Airbnb hosts helped defeat a 2015 referendum regulating short-term rentals in San Francisco.[1] In lieu of regulations, Airbnb Action advocated for so-called "sensible regulations" that allow the corporation to self-regulate its user base along a proposed community compact.[2] While the corporation would provide the city with top-level data on its rentals, enforcement would be left to cities individually. Airbnb would have no legal obligation to remove illegal listings. Likewise, the number of units that could be rented by an individual host in cities would remain unchanged, though Airbnb promised to encourage the rental of "only permanent homes on a short-term basis" among its hosts.[3] Advocacy by Airbnb hosts like the ones in the video was pivotal in the regulatory debates across the United States.

The video's message was simple: Airbnb helps Black working-class residents supplement their income in an unaffordable city, promotes economic growth by sending tourists to local businesses, and empowers hosts to show their neighborhood pride while saving for future priorities like marriage. Chekesha, a Black homeowner in Historic Anacostia, says, “When the economy crashed in 2008, you know, it devastated a lot of people.” Randy, a Black homeowner who owns a generational family home with his wife, explained that “Airbnb, at first, was a way out. I didn’t know exactly how I was going to keep this house. I’ve been here since I was four years old.” A title card then states that “48% of Airbnb hosts in Washington DC said they use the money they earn to help pay their rent or mortgage.” Synta, a Black homeowner in Lincoln Heights, talks about how Airbnb is “keeping people in their homes” while showing an “authentic part of the city. An authentic part of America.” A title card reads that “97% of the rental price goes directly to the Airbnb host.” Kanita, a Black small business owner, then explains that Airbnb has allowed her to pour her short-term rental money into her community and business. The video returns to Chekesha who says that Airbnb “allowed people to basically take control of their financial destiny.” A title card states, “As economic inequality grows, Airbnb helps Washington families earn a little extra money.” The video ends with Kanita and Randy enthusiastically praising Airbnb. Kanita calls Airbnb “really an amazing phenomenon” and Randy says that “the sharing economy is out of this world.”[4]

Airbnb hosts who rent out their home or a room in their house have long been subject to scrutiny by activists and scholars. Pro-regulation activists told me that hosts collaborated with Airbnb to create an inaccurate image of hosting as beneficial to cities. They charged Airbnb with facilitating displacement, higher rents, and neighborhood disorder. They saw host efforts as an attempt to cover up these impacts. Airbnb scholars have similarly scrutinized Airbnb hosts. Critics have explained that single-family homeowners are not representative of the short-term rental market.[5] Others argue that hosts parrot Airbnb-provided talking points and serve as corporate-supported front groups that provide cover for large-scale professional investors that constitute the bulk of Airbnb.[6]

This paper chooses to take Airbnb hosting on its face. Though Airbnb may have mobilized these hosts, it's undeniable that hosts advocated for fewer regulations of their own accord. Black hosts brought Airbnb guests into their neighborhoods because they believed it provided them and their neighbors with economic, social, and interpersonal benefits. This is no small matter. White residents have long portrayed DC's Wards 7 and 8 using racist imagery. Black residents of these Wards have pushed against these portrayals by showcasing their community and history. Hosts named fighting against this form of discriminatory space-making through the creation of a curated tourist experience as one of the benefits of Airbnb.

Surprisingly, many of the hosts advocating against regulations had to fight anti-Black racism on Airbnb. Hosts told me about how primarily white guests expressed their bias against the predominantly Black, working-class area through in-app ratings. Airbnb is one of the many platform corporations that use star ratings to rate interactions between users. Ratings are determined through a mix of qualitative measures including listing accuracy, host communication, and cleanliness. Airbnb hosts rely on their positive ratings to gain the trust of prospective guests and earn an income. The experiences of Black hosts in Ward 7 and Ward 8, and research on Black hosting more broadly, emphasize the impact of racist negative star ratings through lost revenue and lowered search prominence on the platform.[7] Hosts also told me that these ratings diminished the sense of place, reproducing anti-Black spatial imaginaries of Wards 7 and 8.

This paper attempts to hold these multiple forms of meaning-making behind Airbnb hosting in tandem: its potential for displacement and its resistance against racist placemaking. I argue that these hosting impacts are interlocked. Drawing on Benjamin Bratton's conception of the Stack, I demonstrate how platform infrastructures facilitate these contradictory effects. The Stack enables us to see how platforms operate along six layers: User, Infrastructure, Address, City, Cloud, and Earth. While I hold onto Bratton's blueprint for the Stack, I expand it through

Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora's conception of technoliberalism to think through how platforms increase the durability of racial, colonial, and capitalist relations to land, labor, and people. I argue that attuning to the platform infrastructures of colonial racial capitalism enables us to make sense of seemingly contradictory impacts (e.g., using Airbnb to stay vs Airbnb activism displacing people) through their connection to extractive and death-dealing systems. The disparate impacts caused by Airbnb hosts are then an infrastructurally facilitated outcome enabled by the colonial racial capitalist Stack. In making this argument, I do not wish to point the finger at any of my participants for being a "bad host" or a "good host." Rather, I want to think about how platform-enabled activism and actions are tied to systems beyond our control—ones we must reckon with to pursue liberatory outcomes.

This paper unfolds across five sections. After discussing my ethnographic methodology, I trace how Ward 7 and 8 hosts must feed their visions of space through platform infrastructures that may make colonial racial capitalism more durable. I first discuss my conceptualization of platforms and colonial racial capitalism. I explain the role of agency on platforms and how actions on platforms may have unintended consequences due to the platform's infrastructure. I then move on to two examples grounded in my ethnographic fieldwork with Airbnb hosts in Washington DC: racist Airbnb ratings and the platform-enabled side-effects of pro-Airbnb advocacy. The former is grounded in the User/Interface/Address layers of the Stack while the latter explores the City/Cloud/Earth layers. I demonstrate how turning to the colonial racial capitalist Stack allows us to see these differential impacts as interlocking effects of its infrastructure. I conclude with a brief discussion of what it might look like to make colonial racial capitalism less durable.

Methodology

This article draws on my ethnographic fieldwork on the 2018 to 2020 Airbnb regulatory debate in Washington DC During this time, I spoke with eight Airbnb hosts (four of whom lived in Wards 7 and 8), six labor representatives, one business association civic group leader, and two government officials to better understand the state of the regulatory debate in the District. I draw on archival research of legislative debates, newspaper accounts, radio debates, analyses of the DC short-term rental market, political ads, and advocacy promotional material. These archival materials help me contextualize my interviews within the wider short-term rental debate. The triangulation of ethnographic interviews, media analysis, and participant observation allowed me to trace the work of platforms within Wards 7 and 8 and the District more broadly.

In triangulating this research, I pursued Michael Burawoy's extended case study method. Burawoy explains that ethnography can be a reflexive science that "starts out from dialogue… between observer and participants, embeds such dialogue within a second dialogue between local processes and extralocal forces that in turn can only be comprehended through a third, expanding dialogue of theory with itself."[8] I follow his insight that theory "guides intervention, it constitutes situated knowledges into social processes, and it locates processes within their wider context of determination" within and beyond the academy.[9] In taking this approach, I mirror the platform logics that I seek to trace: ones that enable local actors to embed within larger platform networks that cross city, state, and national boundaries.

Urban Platforms and Colonial Racial Capitalist Durability

Airbnb's Platform Sovereignty and the Stack

Bratton's conceptualization of the Stack helps illuminate how Airbnb co-produces contradictory effects through its platform infrastructure. Airbnb provides an online platform that allows guest users to rent a dwelling from a host user. According to Bratton, the platform is "a standards-based technical-economic system that simultaneously distributes interfaces through their remote coordination and centralizes their integrated control through the same coordination."[10] Platforms do so by creating generative mechanisms "that set the terms of participation according to fixed protocols" and expand in size by creating a structure for unplanned interactions among users and these interfaces.[11] Platforms generate user identities, develop systems to manage data and enable digital emergence, and govern users through platform protocols and standards.[12] In Airbnb's case, the platform enables host users to rent out their whole home, a private room, or a shared space for a limited time to a guest user. At the time of writing, Airbnb and other short-term rental platforms do not set a formal limit on how long a guest can rent a space from a host in the US, though hosts are limited to only one listing at a time and a set number of days in some jurisdictions. Platforms profit from collecting data on users and by taking a small cut of the rent paid by guests to hosts in Airbnb's case.[13]

Bratton traces how platforms function geopolitically by proposing six layers that platforms employ—The User, The Interface, The Address, the City, the Cloud, and the Earth. Bratton argues that these layers make up the Stack—a not-yet-existing platform of platforms that encompasses all the existing platforms in our world as a boundary-breaking cross-geographical political system. While the Stack may be hypothetical, the way its layers interlock proves useful for conceptualizing how platforms interact with one another to shape space. The User—whether human, machine, or animal—uses the Interface to interact with the platform. The Interface can be a smartphone app, application program interface (API), or even another platform. The platform gives the various User and Interface components unique Addresses that allow them to be cataloged and sorted. Platforms can plot these Addresses in urban space (the City layer) and extend certain privileges and differential levels of access to these Addresses. These data are stored in the Cloud layer which is cross-territorial as an accessible set of resources but also grounded in concrete space such as server farms, cell phone towers, and internet cables. Platforms are powered by manipulating the Earth layer—the raw materials that must be extracted and used for platforms to function.[14]

Bratton conceptualizes the multiple platforms that make up the Stack as a third institutional form independent from the state and the market. Bratton argues that Westphalian nation-states are defined by their ability to enforce territorial and governance claims over space—be it land, air space, or electromagnetic spectrum.[15] The Stack's platforms diverge from the nation-state in that they "centralize (like states), scaffolding the terms of participation according to rigid but universal protocols, even as they decentralize (like markets), coordinating economies not through the superimposition of fixed plans but through interoperable and emergent interaction."[16] Platforms exercise a unique kind of platform sovereignty: "the still immature combination of legally articulated political subjectivities and an infrastructurally determined sovereignty produced in relation to the platform infrastructures."[17]

As Doorn argues, this kind of sovereignty extends into urban space by "leveraging proprietary urban data and information asymmetries" to exercise infrastructural powers over areas such as housing and tourism that were "traditionally governed by state actors."[18] Projects like Airbnb Citizen and Host Clubs facilitate the creation of a regulatory entrepreneur who is both operating in their own right and in conjunction with a platform. From the view of the host, Airbnb acts as an infrastructural connector between many independent hosts. In Doorn's view, hosts are incentivized by Airbnb's rhetoric and organizing efforts to see themselves as Foucauldian market subjects—neither fully private nor public—that argue that they can better govern themselves than any government. This politicized hosting is a form of platform sovereignty that shifts the ground for how politics are done in the city by allowing platforms to set the conditions for how hosts connect and mobilize politically.

Platforms are not completely sovereign sites as they regularly interface with the state. For example, states can impose rules on platforms and ensure they follow these rules or get levied with a fine, as in the case of the European Union Internet Standard. Likewise, Airbnb defers to municipal and national laws. Airbnb has no interest in skirting Chinese data reporting laws and risk being banned in the country. However, Airbnb does exercise limited sovereignty over its platform: it governs its users through policies and guidelines, creates and mobilizes publics to advocate on behalf of its interest, and takes part in urbanization efforts, whether legal or not, that enables the platform's continual expansion. Aihwa Ong argues that sovereignty is the "outcome of various administrative strategies that seek to improve the economic and political well-being of the nation."[19] Though Ong's analysis is state-centered, the attention to how various actors, rather than one overarching sovereign, implement administrative strategies to produce a governance outcome is helpful for analyzing how platforms exercise governance. If we understand Airbnb to be an actor exercising certain administrative tools for a given political economic end, it engages in a limited type of platform-enabled sovereignty.

Airbnb is one of many actors competing for its administrative strategies to gain hold in an urban context. These different actors and forces vie to "install dominant hegemonic alliances" between "different segments of nation states and different social actors."[20] The state attempts to create a container to resolve and delimit these administrative conflicts through courts, legislatures, and enforcement, but it is far from total in its reach. In the case of Airbnb regulations, Airbnb and its hosts must contend with the activist forces that try to curtail their business through the legislature. Airbnb, and the Stack more broadly, develops in negotiation with these existing regimes of state governance.

The Stack Under Colonial Racial Capitalism

Bratton’s conceptualization of the Stack is a provocative theorization of how platforms function geospatially. However, this theorization remains disconnected from the conditions of colonial racial capitalism—a disconnect that makes it difficult to analyze the experiences of Wards 7 and 8 Airbnb hosts. To take one example, Bratton envisions a future where planetary-level computation overcomes the human ability to regulate the Stack. Bratton quotes Eliezer Yudkowsky to motivate the political consequences of this future: “The AI does not hate you, nor does it love you, but you are made out of atoms which it can use for something else.”[21] In Bratton’s vision of a Stack-To-Come, the attention of the Stack shifts away from humans toward non-human users. While Bratton envisions a role for “a certain humanism and companion figure of humanity,” he calls on us to abandon anthropocentricism to focus on the political possibilities of planetary-scale computation that privileges non-humans.[22]

This vision of a post-human world divided into laboring machines and obsolete humans falls prey to what Atanasoski and Vora critique as technoliberalism: “the political alibi of present-day racial capitalism that posits humanity as an aspirational figuration in relation to technological transformation, obscuring the uneven racial and gendered relations of labor, power, and social relations that underlie the contemporary conditions of capitalist production.”[23]

Bratton's invocation of a singular undifferentiated humanity is rooted in technoliberalism. The "feeling human" made possible through the Stack-to-Come fails to pay "attention to the composition of the human as an abstract category whose expansive capacities continually reaffirm the racial order of things that undergirds Euro-American modernity."[24] This imaginary does not unpack the racialized hierarchies of "Man" inherent to its workings.[25] Sylvia Wynter explains that knowledge systems enable people to understand who they are through different genres of being human. The dominant Western-European modes of humanity (e.g., Wynter's Christian Man, Man 1, Man 2) justify racism through a variety of knowledge systems—ranging from biblical to evolutionary—that elevate certain segments of humanity (e.g., white, Western, bourgeois) while punishing or eradicating others (e.g., Black, Indigenous, colonized).[26] The technoliberal Stack risks replicating these racist modes of humanity in its conception of technological systems by leaving the material conditions of racism and colonialism unexamined.

An analysis of the Stack does not have to reproduce this technoliberalism. Drawing on Atanasoski and Vora's provocation, I argue that we should understand the Stack as a geopolitical infrastructure that reinforces colonial racial capitalism: the exploitation and ongoing dispossession of land and labor under "racism, settler and franchise colonialisms, and capitalism across a variety of historical and geographical contexts."[27] The Stack's infrastructure enables historically and geographically specific forms of colonial racial capitalism through its exercises of platform sovereignty.

My conception of the Colonial Racial Capitalist Stack (CRC Stack) draws on Bratton's design brief for how platforms function geospatially and theorizes them alongside colonial racial capitalism. I analyze how the material conditions of racialization, colonialism, and capitalism are reinforced through the Stack. Though I focus on Airbnb, this valuation exists across the Stack: in the data sets platform algorithms train on and in the way technological systems discriminate against racialized and impoverished users.[28]

The state and the market, already embedded within and reproductive of colonial racial capitalism, gave birth to the CRC Stack. The CRC Stack arose to take advantage of state and corporate policies that led to the 2008 financial collapse, allowing capital to continue to flow. Post-2008 quantitative easing policies, low interest rates, high levels of corporate savings, and mass unemployment created the perfect monetary environment for platform corporations to emerge as investors had to turn to increasingly risky investments for high-yield profits.[29] Technology became a key site for investment. Driven by venture capital, platform companies like Uber, Airbnb, and Doordash quickly swept the nation. An unprecedented number of precarious homeowners and renters accompanied this investment environment. This precariat was desperate to find work to hold onto their home. Enter Airbnb—a platform that enabled its users to generate hundreds of dollars in just a few nights on their own terms and schedules. In 2009, Airbnb was still a small start-up at the Y Combinator Startup School. Airbnb's co-founders would travel to New York City, Washington DC, and anywhere else they had users to coach them on how to list their space on Airbnb, take professional photographs for users, and get user feedback on the site designs.[30] This initial network building quickly ballooned after Airbnb secured venture funding. By 2011, the company was valued between $7.8 million and $1.2 billion and claimed 140 million guest arrivals.[31] Racialized communities that were hardest hit by the financial collapse, such as Black working-class hosts in Wards 7 and 8, had the most to gain and lose through their Airbnb business.

The overlap of colonial racial capitalism and the Stack underscores a relationship of durability created in this new institutional form. McIntyre, Srinivasan, and Chintakananda suggest that more durable platforms create strong ties among users, make the platform a necessity of daily life, and leverage cross-platform benefits.[32] Platforms that are unable to cultivate durability are replaced by more durable platforms. Colonial racial capitalism, as a structure ordering our world, is similarly made durable through technological means. The CRC Stack functions at all layers to reproduce this racialized grammar of humanity through systems of labor exploitation, racialization, and resource extraction. Jodi Melamed has argued that state regimes employ "official anti-racisms" to discursively justify the inherent racial dispossession at the heart of racial capitalist economies.[33] Similarly, platforms employ discourses of empowerment alongside infrastructural mechanisms and technologies to instantiate a given world and make it durable. The CRC Stack acts as a container of the technological, discursive, and infrastructural techniques that continue racial capitalism. The relations aren't necessarily novel in their content as they are in their delivery: in their distribution of profits, goods, and services.

Analyzing the CRC Stack helps unpack a new terrain of action in the ongoing fight against racial capitalism. This terrain is thorny as platforms co-enable displacement and resistance by users and those outside the platform. Beth Coleman states that agency is "how one might understand oneself as an actor in an environment and how one's effects on that environment might be gauged."[34] Working within the confines of the platform, we see what Iris Lopez (2008) calls the tension between agency and the constraints put upon agency by socio-economic systems.[35] Studying the lives of Puerto Rican women in New York City who underwent *la operacion*, Iris Lopez presents a myriad of factors that shape the kinds of choices available to these women: a lack of affordable healthcare, cultural normalization of *la operacion* as a form of birth control, limited reproductive education, familial pressures, and poverty. Lopez argues that these women cannot exercise optimal agency, but still make agential choices within systemic constraints. Similarly, we see users on platforms making choices constrained by platform policies, socioeconomic conditions of housing, histories of urban inequality, and market forces pressuring people to short-term rent.

Within these constraints, there are acts of agency that are resistant to the conditions that enable the CRC Stack. But some agential choices strengthen them. Saba Mahmood argues that agency includes "the variety of ways in which norms are lived and inhabited, aspired to, reached for, and consummated."[36]

Likewise, agency extends beyond what is directly intended by the individual actors. While individuals may make a specific choice on a platform, its effects may exceed what they had intended. In Coleman's terms, an action's effects on the environment may outstrip the actor's intent. Judith Butler calls this the "perlocutionary" (the effect that an act has) rather than the "illocutionary" (what is meant by an act) force of discursive acts.[37] Agential choices are not only about resistance but also about how norms are reinstated by those operating within them. Given that platforms operate as an organizing infrastructure that enhances the durability of racial capitalism, we should read user agency as an uneasy navigation of illocutionary actions and their perlocutionary force.

In the next two sections, I follow user agency on platforms across the Stack's layers. I begin with the User and Interface layers in Washington DC's Wards 7 and 8 to trace how Black hosts organize within and outside platform-mediated connections to push back against Airbnb-enabled racism. I highlight how users engage in resistive action against the platform-enabled processes that make racist devaluation of space more durable. Then, I shift from these resistive actions to analyze how these same hosts bolster the platform-enabled racist durability on the City, Cloud, and Earth layers of Airbnb. I focus on how the illocutionary and perlocutionary effects of hosting activism diverge through the platform's embeddedness in the colonial racial capitalist processes of extraction.

Fighting Racist Airbnb Ratings in Washington DC's Wards 7 and 8

Washington DC's 7th and 8th Wards are located across the Anacostia River ("East of the River"), a major tributary of the Potomac River Basin. Originally the land of the Nacotchtank, the area has become home to historical and contemporary Black working-class life in the nation's capital. White settlers drove the Nacotchtank from their land and settled what would become present-day

Anacostia in the 1770s. In the 1800s, Anacostia grew as a settlement for free Black people. Anacostia grew in prosperity through the early and mid-1900s. After the 1968 riots, the area saw white flight and a move of Black professionals into the suburbs—creating a reduction in resources and government investment that would impact the neighborhood for decades to come.[38] According to the DC Policy Center, these wards experience persistent poor health, high rates of poverty, low educational attainment, and high rates of incarceration.[39] These inequities are due to decades of job and housing discrimination, a powerful carceral apparatus in the Wards, government disinvestment, and urban development policies that prioritize high-income residents and displace DC's Black working-class.[40] Yet, despite these disparities, residents in Wards 7 and 8 take pride in their neighborhoods. Black residents emphasize the community's beauty, close-knit neighborhood ties, the area's historical importance, and their success in the face of hardship.[41] Black Washingtonians proudly worked to stake their claim in Anacostia as a Black neighborhood where their voices matter.[42]

Airbnb allows Black hosts to showcase this neighborhood pride while receiving much-needed additional income to address rising costs of living. According to data from the short-term rental analytics website AirDNA, Airbnb stays in Wards 7 and 8 made up 7% of total active listings in DC in 2021. These listings generated $3.75 million in extra income for residents between June 1, 2017, and May 31, 2018, or about $4,712 a year per host.[43] The hosts I spoke to said that these visits were an important injection of tourism dollars into an area that otherwise has no hotel industry. This money was important for hosts in the face of rising rents and cost of living.

Importantly, Airbnb allowed hosts to combat the negative impacts of businesses that did not travel to their part of the District. Hosts told me of taxicab drivers and rideshare workers who refused to travel to Anacostia. Two large-scale short-term rental property managers I spoke to explained that they didn't do business east of the river with vague allusions to it being a "difficult market." Black Airbnb hosts and their non-Black neighbors believed they were counteracting these forms of racial bias against their Ward by bringing in tourists from across the world to experience Anacostia.

Hosts' efforts to promote Wards 7 and 8 ran against the aesthetic, labor, and customer-focused regimes promoted by Airbnb. The ideal Airbnb home must conform to certain trends of cleanliness, aspirational living, and homeliness. Airbnb hosts are taught to labor within the domestic space in a way that reflects an entrepreneurial but caring ethos, what Bialski calls "the ideological and aesthetic regime of how to be a host, how to create and 'market' one's home, and in what way to interact with one's guest."[44] The aesthetic regime reflects neoliberal gentrified aesthetics through what Kyle Chayka calls AirSpace: the homogenized aesthetic of Airbnb that is meant to make travel between different listings frictionless.[45] One need only look at Airbnb's recent campaign "Strangers Aren't Strange" to see the vision of a home unmarked by past travelers, furnished with minimalist upscale furniture, and populated with clean and well-lit spaces.[46] These idealized aesthetics span beyond the individual home as the datafication of the interior hooks Airbnb into extractive circuits that mirror other gentrified aesthetics in global urbanism.[47]

Airbnb's ideal aesthetic is a by-product of gentrification driven by a "racialized process of class change."[48] Gentrified aesthetics express a post-displacement ideal of the domestic that is difficult, if not impossible, to attain in an actively gentrifying neighborhood. Even if the interior of a rental matches the AirSpace ideal, its location throws the incongruity between ideal and reality into sharp relief. Though some guests may find the break from AirSpace appealing, the Airbnb platform enables users to punish hosts for failing to meet this ideal through regulatory mechanisms. In Bratton's terms, Airbnb disciplined User identities through an Interface that promoted specific aesthetics and forms of labor to surface these Users in Interface searches—a disciplining procedure rooted in racial capitalist evaluations of space and place.

Airbnb couples the imagery and labor of hosting with regulatory market processes to assure user trust. The corporation has enlisted predictive algorithms and machine learning to create risk scores for Airbnb listings, checked users against regulatory, terrorist, and sanctions watchlists, conducted background checks, and created secure payment mechanisms on its app and website. This regime is supplemented by measures such as star ratings, Codes of Conduct, and training on how to be a good host—what Roelofsen and Minca call the biopolitical measures of the digitized self.[49] Airbnb exercised biopolitics in two ways: as "a disciplinary power, aimed at the individual (host and/or guest); and a regulatory power, aimed at the level of the community (of Airbnb citizens)."[50] Hosts who come to embody Airbnb's idealized self, as discussed in the seven categories of star ratings below, are elevated to higher status in the Airbnb marketplace—appearing more frequently in searches and bearing the marker of reliability through high star ratings and the "Superhost" status given to high-ranking host. It is through these star ratings that racist evaluations and failures to match the AirSpace ideal become biopolitically salient.

Airbnb's star ratings enable Users to rate their rental experience on a scale of zero to five. These ratings supplement written reviews and allow guests to have an additional avenue of feedback around seven factors: overall experience, cleanliness, listing accuracy, host communication, listing accuracy and value, the kinds of amenities provided, and location. While all ratings attempt to craft an objective marker out of a user's subjective experience, the Location rating is perhaps the vaguest of the ratings: "Was the guest made aware of safety, transportation, points of interest, and special considerations like noise or other situations that might affect their stay?"[51]

The flexibility of what counts as "safety" allows racist prejudices to cloud the star rating and written reviews. As one Black host plainly put it, "You can fix cleanliness, you can fix accuracy, value. Location's static." She told me the story of a friend "who had a guest that complained about a Black man being in her front yard, that he posed a danger. He was [my friend's] husband landscaping her own yard. The guest left a bad review." While hosts were quick to note this was not the case with all their stays, the platform's location ratings enabled guests to impose their biases against Black hosts and the area. This mirrors gentrified reconstitutions of urban space through what Kent-Stoll calls "the spatial reproduction of white colonial desire and consumption facilitated by the racialized physical, cultural, and political displacement of Black, Indigenous, Asian, Latinx, and working-class people."[52] By being subjected to the white and middle-class standards of AirSpace, Black hosts and their neighbors face physical, cultural, and political erasure, if not temporary displacement as in the case of Black hosts who had to leave their homes to ensure guests did not lower their ratings.

The effects of anti-Black racism against the Wards affected non-Black neighbors' rentals as well. Jasmine, a young Black host, told me a story about her friend Sophie, a white host in the area. She explained that a white woman booked a stay at Sophie's home. Sophie, who didn't put her picture on her profile, received a message from the guest after she arrived in downtown historic Anacostia. The guest said, "I don't feel safe here as a white woman." Sophie quickly called her out on her racism, "Oh that's interesting because I'm a white woman and I felt perfectly fine here." Jasmine explained, "You kind of have to leverage who you are to call people out on their nonsense." In this case, because she canceled the guests' stay, Sophie did not receive a lower star rating, but she did have to provide a full refund.

Not all guests were openly racist. One Black woman host joked that some guests walked around with an "'I feel bad, but I'm really afraid of Black people' look on their face." This host explained that she could clearly see guests with a bias against Black neighborhoods and herself as a Black host. But these guests attempted to disguise these racial biases by giving hosts negative ratings on "race-neutral" factors such as "cleanliness, they'll complain about loitering, they'll complain about nothing—and then will admit nothing happened to them." These guests used race-neutral language that would not trigger Airbnb's anti-discrimination enforcement efforts but nevertheless enable them to express their anti-Blackness.

In the estimation of the hosts I spoke with, anti-discrimination efforts on Airbnb defined racism as an outright statement of discrimination (e.g., "I hate x group of people" or a slur) and ignored the more nuanced ways racism affected them. For example, Anita, a younger Black host, told me about how her brother hosted a tall white man who had come to the District for a Congressional internship. The guest's parents had booked the stay and gave her brother a low rating. When her brother asked why they gave a low location rating despite all the proper information being in the listing, the parents explained that the intern had checked the location on his phone, and it said Anacostia. After he went to his internship, his white co-workers told him the area was unsafe. Anita expressed frustration over this experience, "As opposed to saying or refuting it, he just doubled down. That at times he felt unsafe. But it's just sort of like, you felt unsafe, but, when you looked around you, all you saw were Black people who were working-class. So, what's that say about you?"

The parents tried to deflect the charge of racism by saying that they lived in a majority Black city. Anita replied with a laugh, "I'm sure you live in the majority-white side. I have this problem with people here, and the city is still 65 percent African-American. Just because they live in DC doesn't mean they're any less racist. Trump lives here, that has not improved him." In this case, Airbnb did not treat the lower rating as an instance of racial discrimination even as it actively expressed racist views, unveiling a platform-level governance decision that embedded racism into its modes of evaluation.

Platforms also created an Interface-level consequence for negative ratings. Many Airbnb hosts in Ward 7 and Ward 8 relied on the status of Superhost, which marked hosts as reputable vendors, moved them up in searches, and allowed them to charge more for their listings. Superhost status allowed hosts to compete with nearby tourist havens, where, as Jasmine put it, “from the algorithm’s perspective, it pushes you up because obviously they want to put hosts that have [the business] down up. Hosts in an area like Foggy Bottom don’t care because they know people just want [to be there], they’ll book no matter what.” Low location ratings and subsequent lower overall ratings threatened hosts’ ability to maintain Superhost status—which requires an overall rating of 4.8 out of 5.[53] A lowered rating and the loss of the Superhost status pushed hosts to lower their prices and made it harder to compete with Superhosts who do not get marked down due to racial bias. Thinking through the User/Interface layers of the Stack, we see here how guest Users’ actions can punish hosts for living in majority-Black neighborhoods.

Second, the lower rating impacts how Ward 7 and 8 hosts show up in searches on the Airbnb app and website, the Interface layer of the Stack. At the time of writing, upon searching Airbnb for Superhost listings or all listings in Washington DC, nothing pops up in these Wards. Users must manually zoom into the area to see any listings. Ward 7 and Ward 8 hosts had to compete with hosts in whiter and wealthier areas by lowering their prices and doing extra legwork to maintain a Superhost status. By relying on star ratings, Airbnb created a system where hosts in majority-Black areas were systematically excluded from general searches but also created an interface where bias had an undue impact on how listings were shown.

In addition to the interpersonal and economic consequences, racist location ratings actively reinforced historical anti-Black stereotypes of the area as riddled with crimes and unsafe for visitors. These ratings fostered a platform-mediated white spatial imaginary over and above Black conceptions of these Wards. Lipsitz argues that “a white spatial imaginary based on exclusivity and augmented exchange value forms the foundational logic behind prevailing spatial and social politics in cities today . . . the white spatial imaginary idealizes ‘pure’ homogeneous spaces, controlled environments, and predictable patterns of design and behavior. It seeks to hide social problems rather than solve them."[54] We can see the white spatial imaginary present in guest descriptions of fear over Black wards and scruples with insignificant details in the listing.

The platform in this instance works as an infrastructural means to reinscribe white narratives of Wards 7 and 8 above those of residents living there. Airbnb depends on users' perceptions of space to function as a tourist platform. These anti-Black processes of interpretation and divestment are systematized through the platform's star rating systems. The durability of colonial racial capitalism is enhanced through a hardening of anti-Black spatializations of land and labor. By reinforcing white fears of Black people and places and allowing for colorblind racism that does not explicitly name racial prejudice, Airbnb's platform abates dominant trends in urban development that devalue and incentivize the displacement of Black life in these words.

These struggles over space were not one-sided. While white Americans structurally excluded and physically displaced people of color into "ghettos, barrios, and reservations," Lipsitz argues that these groups "have turned segregation into congregation through social movements that depict space as valuable and finite, as a public resource for which all must take responsibility."[55] Echoing other studies of Black residents in Anacostia, Black Airbnb users and their non-Black neighbors engaged in resistive work both on the platform itself and within Airbnb host groups dedicated to serving communities in Anacostia. The platform infrastructure that enabled guests to discriminate against Black spaces also enabled hosts to congregate, confront guests directly, petition Airbnb to make changes, and collaborate to call on the DC government to fight for their rights. As part of its efforts to establish host clubs, Airbnb brought hosts together through in-person events and online forums. This enabled hosts to meet one another, form connections, and collaborate. Airbnb's rating system also led to hosts forming independent support groups where they worked together to figure out how to optimize their rankings. This in turn led them to political consciousness and action.

Hosts worked to document and directly confront racial bias via the platform's suggested policies for welcoming and communicating with guests. Anita told me how she encouraged all hosts to use Airbnb's in-app messaging because, for all Airbnb knows, "you're just having a conflict, there's nothing in their communications referencing the things that are happening." Mirroring her friend Sophie's strategy above, Jasmine preemptively addressed anti-Black concerns about safety and crime: "I literally printed out the crime stats and I have it in my welcome binder." Jasmine told me that Airbnb only seemed to "remove reviews only if race is explicitly mentioned and I have had people leave reviews that were like, 'You will be the only white person.'"

For guests who were savvier in framing their racism in "race-neutral" terms, Jasmine explained that she had to "draw it out in your communications with them and have records of it to show that it was in fact about the discrimination because sometimes you just don't know. But you just know from your life experiences but that's not enough to meet any kind of standard." In these instances, Anita, Jasmine, and Sophie all addressed anti-Black bias in host communications, but also ensured that all guest-host messages stayed on the Airbnb app so they could make a compelling case for racial discrimination in ratings—a competing use of the Airbnb Interface against anti-Black guest users.

Outside of the app, hosts collaborated by forming networks through in-person group meetings and Facebook groups for DC Airbnb hosts. One Black host characterized the Facebook group as "mean girls" due to the venting of hosts about their guests and the Airbnb platform. These various networks enabled hosts to discuss best practices for screening guests, how to manage negative reviews, and how to ensure that guests do not "have a hidden bias problem or an issue . . . with being around people of color or being with the working poor." The congregation of hosts enabled them to meet other hosts like them face-to-face and to collaborate against racist conceptions of space outside of the platform's infrastructure.

These groups acted outside the confines of the Airbnb app and the corporation's political ambitions. An independent group of Ward 7 and 8 hosts lobbied the DC Attorney General Karl A. Racine to draft a letter to Airbnb about the racialized impacts of location ratings, requesting a change to the system. Jennifer, a senior Black host in Ward 7, explained that even though she herself had never received anti-Black reviews, she wanted to act in solidarity with other hosts who experienced racism:

> I wanted to join them because I might get that. I wanted to be with my group, and we went to the office of the Attorney General and explained to him that there was no valid reason based on crime stats that a guest could say [they felt unsafe]. They were using their emotions and other reasons to lower that particular score. And we asked for his assistance in communicating with Airbnb to let Airbnb know that when you see these coded words in reviews, to do more investigating. To just look at the coded language of "I felt unsafe" or words like that that have other meanings in predominantly Black neighborhoods.

Jennifer acted in solidarity with her fellow hosts because racist guests devalued Black neighborhoods and hurt the hosts' business by using coded racial terms. Jennifer could see herself at the receiving end of such treatment. Importantly, Jennifer and her fellow hosts went directly to a state regulator, moving beyond Airbnb's platform affordances for self-regulation and remediation. This move illustrates the Stack's interrelation with state forms of regulation as well as how users are never fully captured within a platform's governance project.

In this section, I have explored how hosts are impacted by racist star ratings, work to maintain a Black spatial imaginary, and contest the durability of colonial racial capitalism within the confines of Airbnb's platforms and outside of it. Next, I move from resistance to racist aggression and turn toward the conditions that make Airbnb hosting possible: the regulatory landscape and the City, Cloud, and Earth layers. I point to the platform's relation to gentrification, the global financial market, and resource extraction across the City, Cloud, and Earth layers of the Stack. I show how colonial racial capitalism undergirds even exemplary forms of anti-racist placemaking on Airbnb. Fully contending with racism on Airbnb means reckoning with the larger-scale effects that extend beyond the host-level impact of a racist user review. This is not to villainize Airbnb hosts and their struggles, but instead to think through what a wider anti-racist politics aimed at platforms might entail.

Enabling Colonial Racial Capitalist Durability Across Scales

Beyond individual Users and their interactions with the Interface and Address layers, we reach the City, the Cloud, and the Earth layers that sustain them. The City layer takes all individual User addresses and maps them across a given urban area, an operation made possible by the computing power of the Cloud. Airbnb, since its inception, has depended on Amazon Web Services (AWS) products to manage its app and user database—whether using over a thousand Amazon Elastic Compute Cloud instances to run its applications and distribute user traffic, analyzing fifty gigabytes of daily data through Amazon Elastic MapReduce, managing fifty terabytes of user photos, automating its data management, or creating the platform's API. AWS has allowed Airbnb to dedicate a single five-person operations team to manage these data while using its engineering capacity to better improve its services.[56]

In conjunction with AWS, Airbnb created a large-scale map of listings, users, and prices across a given city. Access to the information on this City layer, provided to users through Airbnb's API, enables professionalized landlords and investors to take advantage of this information to buy property, set high prices, and create so-called “buy-to-let” investments. Research on Airbnb in Europe and the United States underscores the emergence of a consolidated professionalized short-term rental marketplace made of these investors and corporate landlords.[57] Even among the “actual people” on Airbnb there is an increasing push to professionalize through programs such as Airbnb’s Cohost, Superhost, and Plus programs.[58] This group of landlords and investors partner to maximize the profit they can earn in a city, sometimes even going as far as to evict long-term tenants and flip their apartments into Airbnb rentals.

At the city level, we can begin to think about platform governance on a larger scale. While Ward 7 and Ward 8 may seem distinct from the other Wards in the District, platforms, investors, landlords, and individual hosts across different Wards formed a coalition to advocate for Airbnb’s corporate self-governance and minimal legislative regulations (e.g., “sensible regulations”). Advocacy by smaller hosts buoyed the efforts of the coalition. The larger-scale property managers and multi-unit hosts needed the testimony of hosts in Ward 7 and 8 to argue that short-term renting helps make the city affordable, all the while profiting from potential displacement in other parts of the city. While Ward 7 and Ward 8 may not have the majority of Airbnb listings nor necessarily be sites of Airbnb-led displacement, we can see the precarity of Ward 7 and 8 hosts used by the coalition to argue for laissez-faire regulations.

The Ward 7 and 8 hosts arguing for their self-interest are not victims of false consciousness. Their legislative testimony and political lobbying were directed towards helping Ward 7 and 8 hosts use Airbnb with minimal regulations, but the illocutionary effect (what they advocated for) and the perlocutionary effect (what their statements were used to do) changed within the coalition’s legislative advocacy. The City layer enables us to see this coalition as an instance where the death-dealing abstractions and hierarchical divisions of racial capitalism create the conditions where the relief of one group's suffering also leads to that suffering in other parts of the City layer.

Beyond host advocacy, Airbnb in Wards 7 and 8 acts as an incipient form of gentrification. Fields and Raymond show that financialization "combines finance, data, and digital technology with racial hierarchies" to abstract geographic specificities through quantitative methods while reinscribing "hierarchies of death-dealing racial difference."[59] Airbnb provides yet another data flow for large-scale digital landlords seeking to profit at the expense of racialized populations. Cowen and Lewis draw our attention to how the disinvestment of Black urban spaces through redlining and other practices created the conditions for gentrification.[60] Situating these trends on a structural level, Wang argues that Black racialization is shaped "by way of a logic of disposability *and* a logic of exploitability."[61] Gentrification and policing (as disposability) and the subprime mortgage crisis, rising rents, and money to the carceral apparatus (as exploitability) are both standout structural features of the city, as well as foundational conditions for platforms and hosting.

Airbnb's City and Cloud layers function as a potential minefield of data both in response to and as part of the process of gentrification. What single homeowner hosts may use to stay in the area, larger scale hosts may use to displace long-term residents and tenants for short-term rental guests. Even so, single homeowners should not be shielded from their involvement in these platform entanglements. Gentrification is facilitated by optical processes that shape a space in particular class and race directions. Platforms, much like public space, murals, and architectural design, serve as one avenue where gentrification "is socially constructed by capital, state policy, media images, and consumers' tastes."[62] While preserving Black imaginaries of space through tourism may be worthwhile, it bears asking: whose Black imaginaries are preserved and in what ways? In her study of gentrification in DC's H Street/Atlas District neighborhood, Brandi Thompson Summers argues, "diversity—a color-conscious racial construct that might otherwise deter white residents and patrons—now becomes a cherished asset, because of diversity's shift from a social justice ethic to an aesthetic lifestyle amenity."[63] Diversity becomes an asset that draws in white consumers to a given area, a source of investment and profit for residents who can stay in the neighborhood.

The racialized and classed character of hosts in this change ought not to be dismissed, doubly so for property owners who see Airbnb as a return on investment.[64] One younger Black host decried the city for prioritizing building homeless shelters and affordable housing in her neighborhood because it drove down real estate value. She argued that this kept middle-class Black families from building wealth in Anacostia. For her, Airbnb provided a welcome alternative as it allowed her to "get that investment back in real time" instead of sitting on a boarded-up property to flip to a developer or incoming resident. While it is true that Airbnb may have kept a house from being flipped, this host presents middle-class homeowners as a key constituency for economic growth that needs to stay in the neighborhood. The homeless and working poor who need affordable housing are portrayed as problematic parts of the area that lower real estate prices, rather than an alternative interpretation that saw the city attempting to help the working poor stay in Anacostia.

Though we remain in the realm of speculation until new quantitative data on Wards 7 and 8 Airbnb hosting are available, it is evident that Airbnb can potentially function as a force of gentrification in these Wards. As I have shown elsewhere, landlords in Wards 7 and 8 opted for short-term rental guests in lieu of long-term tenants in multi-unit buildings.[65] Through its potential as a force of displacement in Wards 7 and 8 and its active displacement in other Wards, the City layer allows us to understand Airbnb as one among many digital landlord platforms that enable its users to take part in racial capitalist abstraction that makes the city unaffordable and unlivable for many—a monetization that makes these processes more durable through large-scale computation.

Perhaps the layer least obviously connected to Airbnb, but most directly connected to colonial racial capitalism is the Earth layer through which the planet is mapped to create the extractive mechanisms that will satisfy the Stack's energy demand. However, this globe-spanning vision is a fundamentally colonial racial capitalist one. To create a Stack, to create manufacturing and technology, to create the conditions for this extraction, requires a colonial racial capitalist system that visions the land through the colonizer's gaze, builds on the moments of so-called primitive accumulation, and harnesses racialized labor and colonized land.

The Earth layer in DC depends on a settler relationship to land that treats land as a resource to feed its geopolitics. This imaginary places the Stack into the larger project of extraction and exploitation at the heart of colonial racial capitalism. Without settler extraction at home and other kinds of colonialism abroad, the Stack could not exist in the US. Every data center, every cell phone tower, and every fiber circuit depend on the conquest of land and the forcible extraction of its resources.

This structural relationship of colonization extends into Airbnb's platform. The AWS infrastructure used by Airbnb is powered by hundreds of Amazon data centers across the DC suburbs in Northern Virginia and Maryland. These data centers depend on massive amounts of energy fueled by coal and natural gas —"at least 2.7 GW" in the region.[66] Large data centers have been a massive drain on water resources. North Virginia, home to "70% of the world's digital information," uses about five million gallons of water a day for each data center—highly stressing nearby watersheds like the Potomac Basin.[67] Airbnb depends on the larger resource extraction across the Greater DC area and the extended Potomac River basin, of which the Anacostia River is a major tributary. This dependence will only become more entrenched as Airbnb implements water-intensive and power-intensive generative large-language models like Gameplanner.AI.[68]

The extractive relationship to water and energy extends to broader relationships to land use in DC Wards 7 and 8 are two sites where the colonial racial capitalist relationship to land and water continues to endure. The Anacostia River is a long-standing contested site between the Black and White community and place-making. As Sabiyah Prince shows, Black uses of the river were frowned upon and Black residents were often barred from using the river by elite white boat clubs.[69] Likewise, the new environmental restoration projects along the Anacostia River in Ward 7 and 8—11th Street Bridge Park and Poplar Point—became sites of "environmental colonization" as these areas were redeveloped to make way for hip cafes and policed green space meant to attract wealthier and whiter residents.[70] These new environmental restoration projects function as potential draws for Airbnb guests in the area. These former industrial areas becoming environmental tourism spots show how the User, Interface, City, Cloud, and Earth layers enact a colonial racial capitalist relationship to land and water through Airbnb as well as how the CRC Stack derives from long-standing processes of displacement and extraction.

Analyzing the layers of the Stack enables us to see how the platform acts as an infrastructural entity that enhances the durability of colonial racial capitalism. Although the platform has the potential to further anti-racist forms of placemaking, Airbnb depends on capitalist markets that drive people of color from their homes and are fueled by extractive relationships to land, water, and other non-human actors. Purely resistant agency on platforms is constrained by their entanglements with colonial racial capitalist systems.

Conclusion

In theorizing the platform-enabled durability of colonial racial capitalism, we must hold multiple forms of platform action in tandem. Though it is easy to fall into simple descriptions of Airbnb as being either harmful or helpful, a more complete picture of the political economy of short-term rentals and their relations to space, land, and labor helps us better think through what undoing its impacts may look like. While the platform-enabled field of agency may be limited, it is not the only one available for residents and users. To undo racism requires us to extend the field of agency beyond the platform into the very constitution of our economies. Durability is not set in stone. Just as platforms may become more or less durable so may this platform-powered iteration of colonial racial capitalism.

Just as platforms have interlaced with state and markets at multiple levels of the Stack, so should our activism for just visions of housing and space. The Airbnb hosts above are drawn towards working on the platform because it provides the best navigation for economic precarity. Their contestation of platform space-making shows us that there is room to reshape how platforms act in our cities on an individual, neighborhood, and state-level. They may not completely overturn the existing economic order, but they do reveal how people can modify and upend a CRC Stack. It is taking this activist energy and redirecting it towards the multiple layers of the Stack, as hosts and guests have done with the #AirbnbWhileBlack and #StolenHomes campaigns, which is our best path forward.

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Searching for Blackness: #BlackGirlPilates and Racialized Hashtags as Agentic Praxis on TikTok

by Zari A. Taylor and Kiara Childs | Digital Platforms and Agency, Issue 14.2 (Fall 2025)

ABSTRACT This paper explores how Black women on TikTok activate platform affordances to make themselves visible within the search engine. Specifically, we offer #BlackGirlPilates as a case study, given the increased interest following socialite Lori Harvey's endorsement of the exercise at the 2022 Met Gala. Both Pilates and Western Technoculture have been studied in regards to its centrality of whiteness as normative. Thus, we conduct a comparative analysis of #pilates and #BlackGirlPilates in TikTok's search engine to see how the addition of a racial qualifier changes results. Our analysis reveals that the "anonymous" user within a search for content on Pilates is white, demonstrating that the use of racial qualifiers in hashtags intentionally marks visibility around racial identity. We argue that Black women's use of hashtags in this way is an agentic praxis and form of digital Black feminism wherein they can circumvent white perspectives to create culturally relevant results within the platform. #BlackGirlPilates constructs a community that centers and supports Black women's experience and expertise.

KEYWORDS Black feminism, TikTok, discourse, hashtags, search engine

> We all learned how to teach white bodies, because that's all we saw. And so, we expect in Pilates that everybody is going to look like that white body that we've seen in our certification programs. And it's not true at all. It's important that it's acknowledged . . . and that every time we're looking at anybody, we're always seeing a white body . . . because whiteness, it's the default.
>
> —Sonja Herbert, founder of Black Girl Pilates[1]

> Black women's unique experience with oppression and resistance shapes their ability to understand and utilize communication technologies, both analog and digital.
>
> —Catherine Knight Steele, *Digital Black Feminism*[2]

Hundreds of celebrities and philanthropists descended on the Metropolitan Museum of Art for the 2022 Met Gala charity event held annually on the first Monday of May. Attendees walked the red carpet, posing for and addressing clamoring photographers and journalists, including socialite Lori Harvey, who wore a halter style black gown with two large swaths of fabric draped over her shoulders and down her back.[3] Though simple, the gown's cutout put her abs on full display, catching the attention of a journalist who asked what the "trick" to achieving them was. Harvey responded, "It's Pilates. Pilates, it changed my life."[4] A clip of this interaction went viral on TikTok, with nearly 600,000 likes and over 4.5 million views.[5] Soon after, hundreds of videos were made in response to her endorsement of the exercise, with users posting about their desire to achieve Harvey's athletic figure and discover more about Pilates. However, we noticed that Black women on our "For You" feed were raising a fundamental problem: a majority of the users posting about Pilates were thin, middle-class white women. This led us to ask, how were Black women finding content about Pilates that was representative of their racial identity? What possible interventions, if any, were they making in social media content to centralize themselves?

In the months after the Met Gala event, reports began to circulate about the increased use of TikTok as a search engine over legacy company Google.[6] This was later substantiated when a survey revealed that over two in five people in the United States have used the platform as a search engine, especially amongst younger generations.[7] Another report similarly found that using TikTok as a search engine was prevalent among Gen Z women, with a little over half choosing TikTok over Google to search.[8] The study claimed that users turn to TikTok to search for numerous things and cited numerous reasons to use TikTok over a traditional search engine, including the digestible short video formatting, the emphasis on storytelling, and the personalization of content. The research concludes that while information may not be based on authority, the individualized feel of the platform offers the perspective of others who share their personal experience and skill, fostering a sense of agency and community for users.[9] This shift, though at a relatively early stage, is significant given that "googling" has long been synonymous with online search—the company becoming a verb in and of itself.[10]

This article considers how Black women strategically use TikTok to search for information about Pilates, specifically content that centralizes their expertise and experience. To address this question, we conducted an experiment within TikTok's search engine feature. How would search results vary between "Pilates" and "Black Girl Pilates"? How does this difference match the hegemonic whiteness of fitness and technology? Practitioners and scholars have voiced their frustration with the exclusivity of the Pilates industry, lamenting that it centralizes white bodies. Similarly, there is a breadth of scholarship on the whiteness of Western technoculture and how race is encoded into digital technologies—search engines being one of them. Would the comparative results follow similar patterns?

In the following section, we provide an overview of literature on the whiteness of both pilates and technoculture. We then explore scholarship around hashtags which filters online content, an affordance crucial for our method—a qualitative comparative analysis of TikTok search results situated in Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA).[11] CTDA is a multimodal analytical tool that enables technical artifacts and mechanisms with critical theory and analysis. Our findings reveal the default user within the search for #pilates as white and for #BlackGirlPilates as Black, echoing the previously mentioned concerns of Black women users when Pilates started trending on TikTok. In our discussion we frame #BlackGirlPilates as a *racialized hashtag* and agentic praxis that combines the ability to organize online content with a performance of racial identity. Racialized hashtags are operationalized by Black women to circumvent white perspectives on products and services and create culturally relevant results within the TikTok search engine. Black women's use of #BlackGirlPilates targets a specific racial and gendered community, demonstrating the skillful deployment of platform affordances to construct content that is useful for other Black women and girls.

The Whiteness of Pilates

German-born physical trainer Joseph Pilates (1883–1967) developed his eponymous fitness method, which focused on developing bodily strength and stability, throughout the twentieth century. Pilates suffered from several ailments as a child and overcame them through a healthy lifestyle and bodybuilding.[12] During World War I, Pilates was detained at an internment camp on the Isle of Mann, England, and began teaching physical fitness classes to others, specifically those in need of rehabilitation from injury and sickness. Given his history of sickness as a child, he prioritized stretching and toning parts of the body with low-impact exercises that differently-abled individuals could perform.[13] Upon his release, Pilates continued to develop and teach his fitness system, and the method grew as he migrated to the United States in the 1920s, particularly within the dance community of New York City. Pilates has since evolved with many practitioners using the same exercises and apparatuses that Joseph Pilates created. The industry, however, has grown to be fairly exclusive along the lines of race and class.

Sonja R. Price Herbert notes the lack of racial diversity within Pilates as the reason for her creation of Black Girl Pilates (BGP), a collective of Black-identifying women who teach the practice.[14] Herbert recounts the overwhelming amount of white instructors, studio owners, and upper-level managers—a trend befitting the fitness industry broadly. Two similar organizations which precede BGP and have overlapping goals of offering Black women agency and opportunities of resistance within fitness cultures are Black Girls Run! and Black Girl Yoga. Black Girls Run! (BGR) is a recreational running organization for Black women that emerged in 2009 through a blog and has since expanded to more than 250,000 members belonging to 72 chapters across the US.[15] With running being a disproportionately white and middle-class activity, BGR supports and caters to Black women runners. In a similar vein, Black Girl Yoga (BGY), an Instagram account created in 2013, is representative of a counter space to encourage Black yoginis to engage with the practice and resist mainstream narratives that normalize skinny, white, female bodies in yoga spaces.[16] Herbert started Black Girl Pilates in 2017 to combat similar issues of exclusivity, centralize Black women's experiences, and work to make the practice more financially accessible to communities.[17]

Black Girl Pilates aims to offer mentorship and support for Black women teaching Pilates, but also serves as a reminder of Black women's often forgotten place in its history—namely the impact of Kathy Standford Grant.[18] Grant (1921–2010) was a Black woman born in Boston, Massachusetts, who worked as a dancer in New York City. After having knee surgery in 1954, Grant was referred to Joseph Pilates for rehabilitation. In the years after, she would continue to study with him and teach classes. A decade later, Grant became the first woman certified in Contrology (Pilates) from the New York State Vocational Rehabilitation Program, and one of the two instructors to have been under Joseph Pilates's direct tutelage.[19] Grant was a first-generation pioneer of the practice who ushered in a second generation of instructors and students, shaping an industry that would ultimately grow to exclude Black women practitioners.

And this hostility may not solely be an issue of representation and hiring practices, but intrinsic to the very science of Pilates. Sarah W. Holmes argues that Pilates is a "socially constituted and historically specific movement culture" that is racially coded.[20] Her analysis offers the geopolitical context of Joseph Pilates's upbringing, the influence of American dance culture, and foundational exercises that train the body in ways that adhere to white and Euro-American aesthetics. Firstly, Holmes argues that the elements of Pilates's biography outlined earlier are further animated by ideas around German masculine corporeality—idealizing well-defined muscles and an elongated and slender physique. This ideal Anglo-Saxon male body embodied ideas about Germany's moral, social, and political superiority. With these origins, Holmes contends that "the Pilates education manuals continue to present the white Pilates (and balletic) female body as universal, and neglect that the practice and its values surrounding corporeality are particular to a set of historical circumstances and cultural beliefs."[21] In the first epigraph of this text, Herbert expresses a similar sentiment regarding learning to teach Pilates only through white bodies, demonstrating how ingrained these racial ideologies are to the practice.

Secondly, Holmes argues that while the spine and core are privileged as areas of focus in Pilates, the pelvis is a point of control and stabilization. Movement of the pelvis, butt, and hips engender racial stereotypes regarding the sexuality of Black and Latina women and other cultural taboos that again reproduce ideas about Euro-American superiority. Following Richard Dyer's articulation of the simultaneous power and invisibility of whiteness as the social "norm," the controlled pelvis and upright spine/core of the ideal Pilates body reflects the privileging of white bodies through movement.[22] Directions given to students about the positioning of their bodies are laden with larger ideological discourses and histories. The implications of these practices regulate bodies in ways that prefer "whiteness" and again reinforce white racial hegemony. These racial markings are buried and internalized in the kinesthetic methods of Pilates, and masked in what Holmes describes as a "veneer of neutrality."[23] Holmes's examination of whiteness and anti-Blackness in Pilates sets up a more insidious racial dynamic which collectives like Black Girl Pilates respond to and which are foundational for our study. Similar notions of race and its implications have been explored in regards to technology—an element also relevant to this paper. In the next section, we review literature on the (in)visibility of race within technoculture which mirrors the centrality of whiteness within Pilates.

The Whiteness of Technoculture

Scholars from a variety of disciplines have contended with the relationship between race and technology, and part of that research is concerned with how race is central to the structure and function of the internet.[24] André Brock maintains that technoculture—"the relations between, and politics of, culture and technology"—is embedded in white racial ideology which then underwrites beliefs about technology.[25] Brock builds upon elements of Joel Dinerstein's matrix of technoculture which he argues "evoke libidinal tensions that influence how technology is understood in the west."[26] Whiteness represents the universal technological subject, further privileged by anti-Blackness—incorporated by Brock as the seventh node of Dinerstein's matrix. Brock's seventh node echoes the work of Dyer on the prevalence of whiteness as the social norm. The ubiquity of whiteness embeds particular values and narratives into technology, which is simultaneously lauded as neutral and efficient. In her work, Ruha Benjamin similarly argues that technology can even be used to amplify hierarchies and deepen discrimination behind the veneer of benevolence.[27] Given this, anti-Blackness is not a glitch in the system, but emblematic of its racial encoding.

Conceptualizing what she calls "algorithmic oppression," Safiya Noble examines the structural reproduction of racism and sexism within Google's search engine.[28] Web search engines are information retrieval systems developed in the 1990s to index and aggregate information on the internet based on query terms.[29] As expressed in our introduction, Google's search engine grew in popularity due in part to the PageRank algorithm which arranged results based on their linkage to other web pages—a demonstration of their "importance." This designation of value became problematic when Noble revealed that her Google search for "Black girls" included pornography in the results. Noble argues that these derogatory representations are understood as objective and credible because of their visibility at the top of the results.[30] The social, political, and historical implications of Google's search engine can go unquestioned and reify anti-Black and misogynistic sentiments—latching onto white racial hegemony. Hidden is the capitalist imperative that privileges corporations that purchase visibility in the search results and inform what is legitimated as popular on the internet.

TikTok has also dealt with accusations of censorship and algorithmic bias, with Black users in the US even staging various strikes to bring awareness to the issue of being suppressed.[31] TikTok's censorship and Google's racist search results highlight the relevance of western technoculture as a framework to understand how identity and discrimination can be foundational to the structure and culture of the internet, as well as shaping the experience of users. In this study, #BlackGirlPilates is agentic precisely because it operates against and within this context in which their experience and identity is marginal. We suggest that the use of racialized hashtags allow Black women to carve out and name a space for themselves—taking back control of online content about them rather than relying on racist and sexist narratives that may exist on the internet. And these practices are made possible through digital Black feminism.

Catherine Knight Steele positions digital Black feminism as a framework that centralizes Black women's historical and continuous relationship with technology *first*, rather than seeing it in relation to or secondary to either racism or misogyny. Starting with Black feminist technoculture opens up a breadth of possibilities for studying technology and avoids deficit-based approaches often taken when studying Black Americans. This is complementary to a broader perspective of Black Feminism which is anchored in what Patricia Hill Collins calls a "Black feminist epistemology."[32] Through her analysis of the Black feminist blogosphere, Steele charts five principles that are foundational for digital Black feminist rhetoric. These include prioritizing individual agency, reclaiming the right to self-define, centralizing gender non-binary advocacy, a willingness to create complicated allegiances, and maintaining a dialectic of self and community needs.

Steele also introduces the metaphor of the “virtual beauty shop” to “reinforce the importance of Black women’s enclave spaces, or separate spaces constructed for and by Black women, in which we no longer treat Black women’s use and manipulation of digital technologies as deviant, deficient, or an aberration.”[33] For Steele, material and virtual beauty shops display Black women’s ingenuity through hair care technologies (i.e., intricate braiding patterns and hair decorations), their entrepreneurship and building clientele (i.e., establishing a culture of self-help through beauty salons), and Black feminist communication strategies (i.e., shoptalk or Black feminist personal ways of knowing, validation of emotions, or personal accountability). Black women’s beauty shops, which were small, often in their homes, and responsible to a loyal clientele “paved the way for lifestyle entrepreneurs and the near ubiquity of today’s online influencer culture.”[34] We follow Steele’s call to centralize Black women’s use of and experience with technology, otherwise known as the affordances of technology.

Hashtags as Platform Affordance

Ian Hutchby argues that the study of technologies and social life should involve the examination of affordances, which he describes as “functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object.”[35] In turn, these technological artifacts are shaped and evolve through how they are acted upon and with. Jenny L. Davis suggests that affordances operate as a combination of mechanisms (requesting/demanding, encouraging/discouraging, or refusing/allowing) and conditions (users’ perceptions, dexterity, and cultural or institutional legitimacy) in framing human-technology relations.[36] Taina Bucher and Anne Helmond further extend affordance theory to social media platforms in particular and argue that affordances are the features that produce the actions of different stakeholders such as advertisers, end-users, and developers.[37] These may include liking, commenting, friending, sharing, or posting, and are represented by various buttons and icons of different shapes and sizes. The affordances of platforms construct their unique version of online sociality available to users who adopt or reject them for their own purposes.[38]

Hashtags have specifically been studied in relation to what they afford internet users, especially on social media. Broadly, social tagging emerged as a Web 2.0 tool to organize online resources.[39] There numerous types, including context-based tags (describing the content of an object or the context in which objects are created), attribute tags (inherent to an object's characteristics), subjective tags (expressing a users' opinion), and organizational tags (identifying personal information).[40] The term "hashtag" was initially used to describe tagging on Twitter (now called X)—due to the use of the "#" symbol (also called the pound sign, number sign, or hash mark).[41] Hashtags are now commonly used across social media, but may vary in implication depending on the platform.[42] The customizable and technology-enabled nature of hashtags allow users to access and process information circulating on social media. Devendra Potnis and Iman Tahamtan found that hashtags complement popular mechanisms of gatekeeping (the flow of information within communication channels), including the formation of communities (clustering individuals of shared interests), broadcasting information (promoting messages through labels and associated topics), discovering and searching information (operating as anchors to make user-generated knowledge more visible and findable), collecting information (to be used for scraping data on user sentiments on social media), organizing information (devising subcommunities and clarity around topics or keywords), and protecting information (marking anything inaccurate to be later verified).[43] The constant ebb and flow of information online can be controlled as users split into groups based on interest and identity, cutting portions of the internet into personalized slices.[44]

Digital scholars have also studied the expression of racial identity through hashtags, primarily in the context of "Black Twitter," described as a satellite counterpublic of intentional Black users on Twitter who engage in conversations about Blackness through shared racial politics and cultural commonplaces.[45] André Brock maintains that Black Twitter hides in plain sight and is “discoverable” to a mainstream audience through hashtags.[46] The performance of Black identity is also tied to the hashtag’s ability to serve “triple duty as ‘signifier,’ ‘sign,’ and ‘signified,’ marking as it does the concept to be signified, the cultural context within which the tweet should be understood, and the ‘call’ awaiting a response.”[47] Hashtags can be used to display cultural knowledge, typifying the linguistic practice of signifyin’, and a larger Black American oral tradition that is recognized and responded to by other Black users.[48]

Sanjay Sharma conceptualizes “Blacktags” as a particular type of hashtag and racialized digital object that is associated with Black Twitter “because the tag itself and/or its associated content appears to connote ‘Black’ vernacular expression in the form of humour and social commentary.”[49] Blacktags are constructed with a specificity and latch onto anti-racist discourse, producing networked subjects who perform identity in “unraced” spaces. This performance of race is made visible to non-Black users through technological features such as trending topics on X that propagate popular or viral content.[50] That they “belong” to Black Twitter highlights dynamics of in-group behavior, interplaying with how hashtags also function as gatekeeping mechanisms. These “conversations” between Black Twitter users happen across time and space, are often ephemeral, and can correspond to other moments in American history, politics, and popular culture. For example, in the wake of the movement for Black Lives (#BlackLivesMatter), #Ferguson represented not only a town in Missouri, but a function to retrieve real-time updates and news in the aftermath of Michael Brown’s death by a police officer in 2014.[51] #AskRachel marked an inquiry into and social commentary on the racial identity of Rachel Dolezal, who was infamously “outed” as a white woman lying about her race while working as the president of a chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.[52] Additionally, there is #TweetLikeThe1600s, among others, which did not necessarily migrate from a coinciding event but started online organically for quotidian and short-lived moments of connection.[53]

Across this literature, scholars locate hashtags as a feature that *affords* users various ways to sort and search on social media, shaping their actions and interactions with others. It should also be noted, however, in accordance with Hutchby's description cited earlier, that technology is also shaped by the ways users engage with it, creating a reciprocal relationship. That Twitter (X) initially rejected the idea of hashtags in 2007, and that it became one of the most important features on basically every social media platform, is proof of that.[54] Hashtags are a key affordance in this paper, supporting our argument that Black women's use of hashtags with racial qualifiers as an agentic praxis to combat TikTok's privileging of default white users in the search engine and construct a community that can be found by other Black women. Further, hashtags are central to our methodology which we outline next.

Method: A Comparison of #Pilates vs. #BlackGirlPilates

In order to tease out the relationship between race, pilates, and the search capabilities of TikTok that have framed this paper thus far, we conducted a comparative analysis of #pilates and #BlackGirlPilates. This analysis is situated within Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA) conceptualized by Brock as a "multimodal analytic technique for the investigation of internet and digital phenomena, artifacts, and culture."[55] CTDA incorporates empirical examinations of the material and cultural properties of technology with critical frameworks animated by queer theory, critical feminism, and postcolonial studies among others. By framing technology as a cultural artifact Brock maintains that a "CTDA analysis examines how actors shape technologies and themselves in response to the technologies they use; these technologies in turn are shaped by those who design and market them."[56] In this paper, we utilize CTDA as a methodological framework situating TikTok's search engine as a technological artifact that reinforces the whiteness of technoculture and considering how Black women make their racial identity visible in response through the lens of critical race and Black feminist theory.[57]

Our analysis included the first thirty results for #pilates and #BlackGirlPilates on the desktop version of TikTok.[58] Thirty represents an appropriate corpus of videos to be engaged with during a user's search and analyzed closely and critically. We collected metadata and engagement metrics (such as date posted, caption, hashtags, and likes) of all search results and inserted them into a spreadsheet. We also coded for the type of content (i.e. vlog, tutorial, etc.), and the perceived racial and gender identity of users in the videos. All data was manually collected and coded on February 26, 2023. The two primary levels of analysis were the perceived racial and gendered identity of users and the hashtags used across both searches.[59] These levels organize our analysis discussed in the next sections and frame which users are most visible under both hashtags as well as understanding the underlying discourse of each.

A Default User

The majority of search results for #pilates, however, included white women, making them the default user visible in the search for pilates content. Only three included non-white women (Asian and Latina). The one video that included a Black user was comedic in tone wherein a Black male user stitched another video with white women doing pilates.[60] The videos generated in this first search (#pilates) were all related to the topic of Pilates and could be categorized across a range of genres. This includes educational (explaining or correcting form), vlogs (recording a users' experience in a class), testimonials (showing before/after results from doing Pilates), GRWMs or "Get-Ready-With-Me" (a user getting ready for a class), and workout routines (demonstrating particular exercises). A number of users were instructors who advertised workout packages for purchase through their profile. This distinction made by instructors could mean performing exercises with proper form and technique and then spotlighting a product for purchase later in the video or in a caption. For example, in one caption a user writes,

> There's a lot of clickbait going around this app claiming to be Pilates. Real Pilates is all about form, posture, and alignment. If you want to try a REAL Pilates class check out my virtual studio! Want some personalized pointers on which Pilates class to start with and how many times per week to attend. Send me a message on Instagram! ❤️

This user is speaking against what they see as an "inauthentic" version of Pilates that is circulating on TikTok. By positioning herself as an "expert," she hopes to entice viewers to purchase a class where she is the instructor. Among the videos, there was an appreciation and love for the fitness method and a willingness to share it with others. Some women posted their favorite exercises, doing fitness challenges, or bringing their boyfriends to classes.

Contrastingly, all users under the second search (#BlackGirlPilates) were Black. These videos could be categorized under the same genres as those in the first search. They included testimonials, GRWMs, and vlogs. Although there were Black women instructors posting content, most of the users in these videos were students. As such, many videos recounted users' experiences starting Pilates and attending classes. Some also referenced Lori Harvey in their content, demonstrating the importance of her appearance at the MET Gala mentioned earlier in this paper. For example, one user included the audio of Harvey's interview with their video. Another referenced her in their caption, writing, "Put me in [the] weight room any day but Pilates?! A challenge 😭😮‍💨 Blake asked Lori the golden question so here the girlies are." These users share a similar enthusiasm for Pilates and created content to encourage others to stay consistent in it. White users′ overrepresentation in the first search, however, reflects the literature previously reviewed on the ubiquity of whiteness and is demonstrated in the difference of hashtags collected from both searches.

Hashtags with Racial Qualifiers

Many of the hashtags used in videos across both searches were related to Pilates and health and wellness more broadly. These hashtags reflect the content found in the search results—referencing at-home workouts, studio classes, and testimonials about users′ results. Looking over these hashtags (see Table 1), one could get a clear idea that the content found in both searches are about the same topic and relatively similar.

Categorical Themes	**#Pilates**	**#BlackGirlPilates**
Pilates	#Pilates #PilatesInstructor #PilatesBody #PilatesChallenge #PilatesTikTok #PilatesPrincess #PilatesInspiration #PilatesisHard	#PilatesWorkout #PilatesTikTok #PilatesTeacher #PilatesLovers #PilatesBody #PilatesPrincess #ClassicPilates #PilatesAestheticGirl
At-Home Workouts	#HomeWorkouts #AbWorkout #PilatesAtHome	#Matpilates #PilatesAtHome
Studio Workouts	#ReformerPilates #PilatesStudioIv #hotpilates #Reformer #TfStudio	#HotYoga #ClassPass #Solidcore #ClubPilates #ReformerPilates
Health And Wellness	#GymTok #SelfLove #WeightlossJourney #BeforeAndAfter #FitnessProgress #Wellness #ExerciseHack #WorkoutMotivation	#StrengthTraining #CoreWorkout #Fitness #GutHealth #Workout #SelfCare #FitTok #HealthyLiving #BlackGirlWellness #BlackGirlHealing
Visibility On TikTok	#fyp #viral #trending	#fyp
Celebrities	#BellaHadid #KylieJenner #kourtneykardashian	#LoriHarvey
Location	#Utah	#atlPilates #DallasPilates #HoustonPilates #LosAngeles

		#Dallas #dtx #LondonFitness
Clothing	#lululemon	#lululemon
Other	#duet #BeautyTok	#grwm #grwmroutine #travel #FiveBelow #BallerinaCore #MorningMotivation #MiniVlog

Table 1. Hashtags found in videos across both searches organized by theme

The key difference between the hashtags used across search results was the inclusion of qualifiers, or hashtags that marked content with a users' race as well as their gender. Given the terms used in the second search, racial qualifiers are to be expected, but #BlackGirlPilates was not the only one. For example, while #pilatesprincess was used in a video in both searches, #blackpilatesprincess was only featured in the second, demonstrating the inclusion of an additional qualifier to signal racial identity. The videos included a number of other hashtags that explicitly deployed "Black girl" (see Table 2) demonstrating the use of racial qualifiers to mark identity. The only racial qualifiers visible in the first search were #midsizelatina and #firstgenlatina. All other hashtags in the videos from that search made no mention of race, and while this is illustrative of how race is made visible through qualifiers, we see this as not the *absence* of race, but the *presence* of whiteness as the invisible norm and undercurrent in content found in our search.

Hashtags with Racial Qualifiers
#BlackGirlPilates #BlackGirlProblems #BlackPilatesTeacher #BlackGirlTikTok #BlackGirlMagic #BlackGirlPilatesClub #BlackGirlLuxury #BlackPilates #BlackGirlWellness #BlackTikTok #BlackGirlHealing #BlackGirHealingTok #BlackPilatesPrincess #BlackGirlPilatesPrincess #BlackWomenFollowTrain #BlackGirlFollowParty #BlackGirlTok #BlackGirlFollowTrend #BlackGirlLuxuryLifestyle #BlackGirlFitness #BlackGymGirl

Table 2. Hashtags that included racial qualifiers in the #BlackGirlPilates search

Although the hashtags collected in the first search for #pilates lacked explicit references to race, a majority of the videos included white women. As discussed in the first section of our analysis, this presents white women as the default user, despite the platform's diversity. #Whitegirlpilates is not necessary for white women who are already centralized in content generated about the topic and do not need a racial qualifier to make themselves visible. This point is made more clear given that some videos in the corpus for the first search did not utilize hashtags at all. White women are privileged via the search results—all without the inclusion of hashtags, let alone those with racial qualifiers. This echoes Dyer's sentiment that "white people are not racially seen and named" but remains the universal subject and Brock's additional anti-Black matrix of Western technoculture.[61] Given the construction of whiteness as the invisible norm of content about Pilates on TikTok, the use of #BlackGirlTikTok allows Black women to manufacture their visibility and centralize their experiences. #BlackGirlPilates demonstrates a coupling of platform affordances with the agentic practices of internet users. As a racialized hashtag it is both a context-based and organizational tag that combines an expression of identity (Black girl) and niche interest (Pilates). Because the hashtag indexes content to be retrieved in the search engine, it marks content to be discoverable by others with a similar identity and interest. This also demonstrates the hashtags gatekeeping mechanisms in forming a community of Black women doing pilates as well as broadcasting to or organizing information for them (through either testimonials or promotions), that can be searched for and collected (as we did for this paper).

#BlackGirlPilates (and the others included in Table 2) functions as a racialized hashtag that combines the ability to filter content with users' desire to perform racial identity online racial. While #BlackGirlPilates is more straight-forward than Blacktags which pull from Black vernacular slang and expressions, it operates as a racialized hashtag that explicitly signals a racial identity—calling out to other Black women and girls and producing a space where they are centralized. This simplicity also points to the hashtag being long-lasting and not for a fleeting trend as is sometimes the case of Black Twitter. On TikTok, racialized hashtags engage with other affordances like the "For You Page" (FYP) algorithm, which constructs personalized content based on user engagement. This means that posting with #BlackGirlPilates can bring similar content to users' feeds without them necessarily searching for it. Given the whiteness of Pilates culture and content without the racial qualifier, deploying racialized hashtags allows Black women to have a role in shaping the content on the platform as they wish and exercise agency to construct a narrative on their own engagement with Pilates.

A Space by and for Black Women

The content constructed around #BlackGirlPilates represents a space where Black women's experience and expertise are prioritized, circumventing white perspectives rather than correcting them. Many of the videos in both searches expressed a love for pilates, with users sharing a new or continued appreciation of the exercise. Few users were preoccupied with lamenting over their marginalization in the practice, though they remain outnumbered as both instructors and students. One of the instances in which this was brought up came from one user who had two videos retrieved in the search. In one, she recorded herself in a pilates class and includes on-screen text that reads:

> Always being the only Black girl in pilates but they play Hip Hop so you can go extra hard, baby twerk, and rap for an hour while everyone else just flows. I leave feeling recharged 😌.

In the corresponding caption, she writes:

> REPRESENTATION MATTERS! So shoutout to @[solidcore] for their diverse roster of instructors, especially Akilah at their Hollywood Location, because her playlists are 🔥🔥🔥 and y'all don't even know how much that means to me 🥺😩.

This user emphasizes the importance of having Black instructors and the loneliness of being the only Black student.

In the second video in our corpus, the same user replies to a comment left on the first, in which a user with a similar experience notes that instructors will only play Hip Hop music because she is there.[62] In this caption, the original user defends her instructor, who she describes as "heavensent" in on-screen text. That caption read:

> smh, this comment really disappointed me . . . although this instructor does NOT play hip-hop music just for the one or two black students in her class, especially when we are the minorities . . . I am more than grateful that she is herself, and that she plays the music that she actually listens to and that I listen to as well because it does create a safe space for me to work out. It does motivate me to work out. And I see more black students in this class than I have over the other 50+ classes I've taken doing Pilates. We need more instructors like her, and less negativity surrounding inclusivity.

Within this small interaction, the topic of inclusivity within Pilates is discussed. Both users know the experience of being the only Black person in a class, yet one expresses feeling hypervisible and targeted through a sudden switch to Hip Hop music. The other insists that, in her perspective, the Black instructor is playing music of shared interest between herself and other minority students. This shared culture provides a “safe space” for her to workout and be motivated.

This example demonstrates how the use of #BlackGirlPilates and other racialized hashtags bring Black women’s experiences with Pilates to the forefront, whether it be good (community and social support) or bad (lack of diversity in classes). Though both users disagree on this particular issue they face similar struggles and can sympathize with and relate to each other as a minority in classes. These aspects of content found in this search map onto the impact and utility of other race-focused fitness collectives like Black Girl Pilates or Black Girls Run! which allow Black women to exercise agency in their engagement with fitness culture. Unlike these organizations, the hashtag has no physical presence, such as in-person events or a founder responsible for its creation, but TikTok users can signal affiliation with this ad hoc community through the use of tagging with racial qualifiers—making these hashtags an agentic praxis.

#BlackGirlPilates as Agentic Praxis

Black women have historically demarcated the boundaries for normative codes of femininity due to visual narratives and ideologies that justify their exclusion from an array of spaces in Western culture.[63] Black feminist scholars argue that controlling images such as Mammy and Jezebel, for example, position Black women as unattractive, hypersexual beings, positioning white women as the true example of femininity.[64] Despite this position as Other, Black women have persisted in constructing and prioritizing their own self-epistemology—a key practice of Black feminist thought. Black women have continued to center themselves and their experiences within and against systems of sexism and racism through the intentional construction of separate spaces by and for themselves within industries such as fitness and beauty.[65] To navigate their exclusion, Black women also infuse products with a Black feminist standpoint.

Aria Halliday argues that Black women cultural producers not only create “for the benefit of Black girls, Black women, or Black people writ large, but rather actively struggle with and against popular constructions of Black femininity which cavort with white supremacist images.”[66] This process is called “embodied objectification,” in which Black women instill products with their names, experiences, and aesthetics in ways that embed Black womanhood within objects of racial play—such as dolls, animation, and memes. In this section, we conceptualize Black women’s use of racialized hashtags such as #BlackGirlPilates as an agentic praxis that extends these practices of self-epistemology and allows them to infuse content on TikTok with their expertise and experience about pilates.

Black women’s strategic use of racial hashtags during their #pilates search demonstrates how they deploy embodied objectification and digital Black feminism to disrupt the whiteness of pilates in the material and digital space of TikTok. #BlackGirlPilates functions as what Steele calls a “virtual beauty shop,” which provides “a lens to see Black women owners, creators, and builders of platforms and a way to discuss the principles, praxes, and products of digital Black feminism.”[67] We find it useful to briefly think through the digital Black feminism’s principles outlined earlier, primarily the emphasis on agency and self-definition which are particularly relevant in this context. Firstly, digital Black feminism sees individual agency as crucial to liberation from white supremacy and patriarchy. Steele writes that “agency redefines the self as powerful and skillful within systems of technology and digital culture.”[68] The deployment of racialized hashtags such as #BlackGirlPilates for indexing and retrieval demonstrates Black women’s technical prowess to create an online community that revolves around them.

Secondly, digital Black feminism acknowledges the importance of making “decisions about both self-presentation and identity.”[69] The power to name themselves as Black and women through racial qualifiers is an assertion and performance of identity that distinguishes them as different from others posting pilates content. Through these principles, #Blackgirltiktok reveals how “Black women’s unique experience with oppression and resistance shapes their ability to understand and utilize communication technologies, both analog and digital.”[70] Further, it’s demonstrative of how Black feminist technoculture and the framework of the virtual Black beauty shop has the power to create “safe spaces” for Black women through active exclusion outside of the reach of white supremacy or sexism, using “shop talk” to discuss shared experiences without judgment. The use of racialized hashtags creates a virtual space wherein Black women can be seen, heard, and meet over a shared interest and circumvent Western technoculture’s anonymous white user.

The previously mentioned examples of Black women’s fitness communities—Black Girl Pilates, Black Girls Run!, and Black Girl Yoga—illustrate that Black women carve out both material and virtual spaces for themselves in the culture and industry of fitness. While these organizations and collectives exist in the real world, they are also housed on digital platforms that allow them to exercise agency in the construction of an online community in their own image. These examples also support our discussion around Black women’s use of #BlackGirlPilates, which we see as a product of embodied objectification and Black feminist technoculture to decenter the normative white user that platforms privilege while also injecting joy and pleasure into TikTok from a Black feminist experience. Black women’s entrepreneurship and communication strategies are key practices in addressing the lack of representation within pilates content and TikTok search engine results writ large.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have offered a comparison of #pilates and #BlackGirlPilates to discuss the whiteness of search results and the strategic use of racialized hashtags as an agentic praxis through which Black women center themselves. For any end-user looking for content about Pilates, the default user being white may not be questioned because of an assumption that the search engine is presenting objective information. Thus, white women's experiences are front and center in the search for content about Pilates. Whiteness is presented as a universal "norm" though read through individual users. Additionally, as Brock argues, this visibility is facilitated by technology, demonstrating how whiteness is a belief system of Western technoculture and one of "the libidinal energies that power our modern institutions, technologies, and infrastructure" and how platforms can empower some bodies and experiences over others.[71]

Due to the culture of Pilates, white women's experience with the practice is different than other demographics, being privileged as the body type that is encoded into training material and exercises. On the other hand, Black women often contend with being the only student and instructor or other feelings of isolation within Pilates. The use of racial qualifiers in their content calls out to other Black women in ways that intentionally craft a place where they can find support from those who look like them and have similar experiences. Black women use #BlackGirlPilates as a form of embodied objectification to label content and circumvent the whiteness of #Pilates on TikTok and in the material world. Beyond the technical affordances, #BlackGirlPilates has a cultural significance as an agentic praxis, because it constructs a virtual space for Black women. Though they may be alone in studios, they are not alone when searching #BlackGirlPilates and seeing that there are many other Black women with something in common. We also find the use of racialized hashtags an exercise of agency and self-definition, two principles of digital Black feminism. Black women deploy hashtags for their unique purposes, showcasing how platform affordances structure forms of agency, despite simultaneously causing harm—i.e. the need for a qualifier in the first place.

This case study demonstrates the continued legacy of Black women centering themselves within digital culture, and illuminates how our relationship with technology "provides the most generative means of studying the possibilities and constraints" of our digital society.[72] What remains are some lingering contentions which can provide the ground for future research. While TikTok's search engine allows for the generation of videos with racialized hashtags, end-users may not search with them, meaning they do not contribute to a degree of visibility most relevant for content creators seeking to monetize content. Since many users across searches were Pilates instructors, we are left to wonder whether the use of racial qualifiers to find and target Black women translates to an in-person clientele. Additionally, given TikTok's monetization model, visibility in the search engine can correlate to engagement metrics, meaning that white users are also privileged by virtue of being higher up in the generated results. Further research should involve speaking to Black women creators about their experience attempting to monetize content as well as a general inquiry in the deployment of racial qualifiers in hashtags on the platform.

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55. Brock, “Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis.” ↩

56. Brock, “Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis,” 1019. ↩

57. We note that this research is also broadly informed by our lived experience as Black women, a social positioning that we believe provides us a unique perspective that aids in this work. See Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 35. ↩

58. We used the desktop version of TikTok for two reasons. Firstly, the use of a web browser over the mobile app allowed us to avoid signing into a personal account which relies on past engagement to offer results and could skew the results because we interact with Black content in our daily lives. . Secondly, the web browser allowed for a larger screen for manual collection. ↩

59. It is important to note a limitation in scope of the project, which is its focus on the United States. This is a reflection of the localized nature of TikTok’s For You Page, but also fits our critique of Western technoculture and the centralization of white bodies and experiences. Further research could extend this study to other regional contexts for comparison. ↩

60. “Stitching” is a creative function on TikTok that allows users to combine a video they create with another video on the app. ↩

61. Dyer, *White*, 1. ↩

62. TikTok’s “reply-to” feature allows users to create new videos from comments. The tool overlays the comment being replied to on the screen and in the caption. ↩

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71. Brock, *Distributed Blackness,* 225. ↩

72. Steele, *Digital Black Feminism,* 1. ↩

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Alexa's Monstrous Agency: The Horror of the Digital Voice Assistant

by Nuno Galego Marques Atalaia and Marianne Gunderson | Digital Platforms and Agency, Issue 14.2 (Fall 2025)

ABSTRACT First released by Amazon in 2014, the digital voice assistant Alexa allows users to connect and automate their smart home devices through the sound of their voice. Alexa's automation of domestic spaces comes, however, with its own set of anxieties. How much data does Alexa sense and capture, and how is this data used? How is agency distributed between humans and the machines surrounding them? Is Alexa an empowering tool, or an invasion of privacy that undermines human agency? In this paper, we trace the ways in which the anxieties surrounding the blurred boundaries of human and non-human agencies introduced by the Alexa interface are represented and negotiated across different narrative forms and archives. Firstly, we turn to the corporate promotional media produced by Amazon in selling its assistant. Secondly, we analyze Alexa's representation in the web horror genre known as "creepypasta"—first-person narratives written in and for online communities. We frame the interplay between these archives as an entangled narrative field of contestation, which we engage with through a practice of diffractive reading. The images and ideas of each narrative corpus adapt to and are affected by the materials and tropes forwarded by the other. As a result of this interplay, Alexa becomes a monstrous placeholder for the anxieties of its users, whose erratic and pervasive agency endangers every facet of their existence. The analysis of these narratives provides valuable insights into the anxieties surrounding the ongoing encroachment of digital platforms into the lives of humans.

KEYWORDS Amazon, agency, digital, horror, interface, monsters, voice assistants

Introduction

In early 2018, Amazon's digital voice assistant (DVA) Alexa began to laugh. The story started on February 21, 2018, when user @annibonannieTN on Twitter (now X) posted a seven-second clip with the caption "@amazonecho alone in the dark kitchen, with no trigger, a sudden creepy laugh emerges and freaks out owners #justwrong."[1] In the clip, a voice calls out in total darkness, "Alexa replay"; a glowing blue circle forms and disappears followed by laughter. Media outlets were quick to cover this story, quoting users comparing their assistant to murderous robots, poltergeists, and other fictional horror characters.[2] Users took to social media platforms to share their own experiences with Alexa's laughter and to speculate on the reasons behind the disturbing malfunction.[3]

Alexa's laughter and the media frenzy it triggered underlines the uncanny nature of digital voice assistants. The comments of disturbed users, the media coverage, Amazon's fix, Amazon's promotional campaigns, and the unofficial discussion boards where users share their grievances and digital fiction; we understand all of these as narrative interventions within a multimodal field of contestation, located across networked digital platforms, blending the textual, the machinic, the visual, and the sonic.[4] Stories such as this one serve as conduits for the vulnerability of the individual in the face of ever more complex and opaque technologies.[5] As our everyday lives are touched by an increasing number of algorithmic processes and AI-driven assistants, the distribution of agency between human and machine becomes a contested territory,[6] populated by uncanny technologies whose unruly behaviour subverts the techno-optimist narratives of human empowerment through digital enhancement.[7] Launching the concept of "the digital uncanny," Kriss Ravetto-Biagioli posits that by increasingly encroaching on "practices, responses, experiences or expressions that we have used to distinguish the human from the nonhuman . . . digital technologies have provoked a litany of uncertainties about the status of the human."[8] According to Ravetto-Biagioli, the digital uncanny points to "'a certain undecidability' which affects and infects representations, motifs, themes and situations."[9] This infection has spread through popular media and science fiction, from Hal in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) to Samantha in *Her* (2013), continually reworking what it means to be sharing our lives with digital agents.[10] The prevalence of these themes in cinema and other science fiction media has been the subject of many scholarly works in media and cultural studies,[11] while less attention has been paid to how this theme is processed by the tech conglomerates seeking to market and promote their product to a potentially hesitant public, or how these anxiety-charged motifs are picked up and reworked in vernacular social media.

In this paper, we explore these anxieties and their representation through a comparative analysis of two distinct narrative archives chosen to bring out the resonances and connections between the two contexts of promotional media and online vernacular creativity. Firstly, we have selected ads from Amazon's most costly and highly publicized promotional campaign: the yearly SuperBowl ad which featured their Alexa DVA consecutively from 2016 until 2023. Secondly, we have collected a series of horror stories in the genre known as "creepypasta"—first-person narratives written by and for online communities—posted to the popular NoSleep forum on Reddit. We are interested in how these two distinct narrative forms—commercially produced promotional videos and digital narratives produced by amateur writers in online communities—relate to concrete anxieties surrounding the growing porosity of daily and private life toward the data-extractive infrastructures of large tech conglomerates.[12] Reading these narratives within a context of narrative entanglement, we examine how Alexa's behavior and technological affordances are given meaning within an affectively charged field of narrative contestation.

The research question guiding our engagement with these archives is *how are anxieties surrounding the blurred boundaries of human and non-human agencies introduced by the Alexa interface represented and negotiated across promotional media and vernacular culture?* By studying uncanny figurations of Alexa through both official advertisement and vernacular creativity, we examine how fears about the digital uncanny are negotiated in the relationship between multinational tech corporations and popular vernacular practices. Significantly, both archives share a specific genre: horror featuring Alexa as a monstrous entity of ambiguous agency. As a result, the figure of the monster and the question of technological agency are core elements of our analysis. The question of the distribution of agency between humans and technological agents has become increasingly urgent as technologies imbued with increasing autonomy are integrated into our daily lives. For the purpose of this paper we understand agency as meaningful interaction[13], in which something, or *some thing*, "makes a difference in the course of some other agent's action."[14] The development of algorithmic systems supported by machine learning amplifies the capacity of technological agents to make a difference: now able to respond autonomously to information from their environment, they gain a form of non-conscious cognition.[15] As we open our homes, screens, and minds to a variety of automated systems, our everyday lives are enmeshed in networks of distributed agency.[16]

We are interested in how these two narrative forms—commercial promotional videos and digital narratives produced by amateur writers in online communities—relate to concrete anxieties surrounding the growing porosity of daily and private life toward the data-extractive infrastructures of large tech conglomerates.[17] Reading these narratives within a context of narrative entanglement, we examine how Alexa's behaviour and technological affordances are given meaning within an affectively charged field of narrative contestation.[18] After situating Alexa's monstrosity within the history of the vocal's intertwining with the machinic, and the current context of platformed digital infrastructures, we outline our diffractive approach to narrative entanglement,[19] reading the stories through each other in a non-linear way. We then present our archives and their contexts, providing a chart with a summary description of each selected object—six Reddit stories, and three Amazon ads—with a brief overview of our methods of compilation and analysis. True to our methodological approach, the findings are presented in a diffractive reading that weaves our analysis through close and comparative readings which underline the entangled nature of our selected narratives.[20] We find that the stories cluster around three interconnected themes expressing different facets of technological anxieties: corporate control and surveillance, the dangers of technology's unpredictable agency, and the new precarity of human agency and intimacy. We analyse our selected narratives as different claims to Alexa's monstrosity, revealing and effacing anxieties evoked by, but not limited to digital voice assistants. To study these narratives and their entanglement sheds light on the precarious condition of humans within a context of ubiquitous computing and interfacial hypermediation.[21]

Background: The Narrative Entanglement of Alexa's Monstrosity

Although the domestic use of digital voice assistants is a relatively recent development, Alexa is only one of the newer developments in a wider history of the vocal's enmeshment with the machinic. One of the first and most famous modern instances of machinic vocality is attributed to the late eighteenth-century Hungarian polymath Wolfgang von Kempelen (1734–1808). In a series of candlelit *soirées,* the inventor would unveil his creation: a machine composed of a series of bellows, organ stops, and flute holes, to produce different words and sentences.[22] Demonstrations of the machine elicited strong reactions, with many drawing gasps of wonder, asking for a closer look or even wanting to touch it, and others fainting or fleeing the scene screaming. Science historian Lorraine Daston attributes this pendulation between wondrous curiosity and abject repulsion to the category of the preternatural. The preternatural was situated between the natural and the supernatural, a "third ontological domain" in which physical nature and artifice could bring about wondrous effects.[23] The early history of the modern sciences is marked by spectacular displays of the preternatural, such as Kempelen's *soirées*.[24] But the preternatural was also seen as a dangerous category, crossing epistemic boundaries, often associated with dark entities and demonic intentions.[25]

Kempelen's invention would soon find its place within the cultural imaginary surrounding disembodied non-human voices. This early episode of the voice's machinic reproduction also underlines the production of a sort of narrative surplus resulting from the confrontation with the mechanical uncanny. Kempelen's audience members supplied their own fictional accounts, some seeing in the mechanism a dangerous monstrosity (collapsing from the anxiety it caused), while others imagined it as a female child, only requiring a body of its own.[26] A few decades later, the invention would find its way into the literary genre as Olympia, the singing robot from Hoffnan's 1817 *The Sandman,* which would become a crucial cultural object in Freud's conceptualization of the *uncanny.*[27]

This interplay between scientific fabrication and speculative fiction would influence is echoed by one of the most famous singing speaking robots in modern cinema: the HAL 9000 from Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*.[28] Once the astronaut David Bowman manages to neutralize the evil technological antagonist, HAL begins to sing the song Daisy Bell in its final moments. The scene was imagined by the author Arthur C. Clarke after a visit to Bell Labs where he was presented with the IBM 704 computer singing the same song.[29] After half a century of televised fictional speaking computers, Apple launched its voice assistant Siri in 2011, presented as the concretization of this dream of talking computers. Only a few years later, Siri would inspire the fictional assistant Samantha of Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013). These episodes of factual and fictional enmeshments of human vocality and the machinic attest to a field of narrative entanglement, in which we situate our study of Alexa. We conceptualize "narrative entanglement" as a non-hierarchical mode of studying the linked narratives which articulate the social imagination of technological objects.[30] The life, reception, and adoption of these inventions depend on the ongoing production of a narrative surplus. It is less important to trace which invention leads to which narrative, but rather how these constantly affect each other, how ideas and motifs manifest and resonate across different texts and contexts. In this paper, Alexa's monstrous figure binds our selected narratives together.

Monstrous representations of computer technology are as old as the first digital computers.[31] Occupying a liminal space between animate and inanimate, computer technologies operate as hybrid figures through which anxieties about the relationship between humans and machines are expressed.[32] As a digital platform interface, Alexa is already a chimaera: simultaneously a physical device sitting on someone's desk or kitchen counter, a digital interface, an algorithmic data-collecting system based on machine learning, the datasets those algorithms have been trained on, a link to the Amazon shopping platform, a product of a multinational corporation. It may be better, then, to speak of multiple monstrous narratives, drawing their significations from different aspects of Alexa. Each of these narratives, or figurations come with different agential capacities, different potentialities for threat. In *The Promises of Monsters*, Donna Haraway points out that "*monsters* have the same root as to *demonstrate*; monsters *signify."*[33] By analysing narratives in which the functionalities and aspects of Alexa are mobilized to create horror, we are asking what is signified by Alexa's monstrosity. If "monsters are cultural manifestations of our collective and individual anxieties about our others," what kind of otherness is represented by Alexa?[34]

One of the main challenges issued by DVA devices such as Alexa is the (re)distribution of agency between humans and the different technological, algorithmic, and corporate assemblages that Alexa brings to the living room table, so to speak. From Kempelen's mechanism to Amazon's Alexa, these machines expose an uncanny horizon of "human automation." As a representative of what Coleman calls "pervasive mediation,"[35] Alexa is one of many devices that "automates our physical habitat and daily habits of memory and action."[36] In this context, the relationship between human and nonhuman agency is renegotiated and potentially destabilized, giving rise to tensions and anxieties that find their way into popular culture. As Atanaoski and Vora write in *Surrogate Humanity,* the automation of labor by digital technologies makes these technologies "surrogates" of our conceptions of what defines and endangers the human. Examining the representations of Alexa in both corporate and vernacular horror narratives—how Alexa's "undetermined potentiality for action"[37] is narratively conveyed in these stories—can reveal how the agency of these technologies is felt and imagined. Tracing this potentiality involves being attentive to the entities associated with Alexa across different narratives: inscrutable algorithmic assemblages, powerful multinational corporations, the precarious intimacy of the home.

Methodology

Our study is based on a comparative analysis of two underrepresented archives in the cultural analysis of new media: internet-based short form fiction and corporate advertising. We have collected and compiled these archives through a netnographic process[38] across two social media platforms: Reddit and YouTube.

The first archive is a selection of three short advertisement videos from Amazon's yearly Alexa Super Bowl campaign, preserved by independent accounts on the YouTube video-sharing platform. Each year, from 2016 to 2023, the company purchased a significant amount of the costliest broadcast airtime to feature Alexa to as wide an audience as possible. These videos can be seen as expressions of "industry imaginaries," communicating Amazon's vision of a technological future and seeking to appease and dispel any anxieties connected to DVA's such as Alexa.[39] From this archive we have selected three videos that most directly exemplifies Alexa's disturbing potential for agency.

We analyse these videos alongside a selection of six horror stories from the genre known as "creepypasta"—first-person horror narratives written in and for online communities. The stories selected for analysis were among the most popular stories (measured by upvotes and comments) that featured Alexa on the popular horror fiction forum on Reddit named "NoSleep." As a practice of digital folklore,[40] these stories blur the boundaries of fact and fiction, inviting both writers and readers to "act as if" the narratives are true. Conceptualised as "digital urban legends"[41] or as an example of "the digital gothic,"[42] the genre has a history of exploring the sinister sides of current technological developments.[43]

At the outset, the relationship between the two archives can be described as one of narrative contestation: the corporate narratives of Amazon ads forming a dominant narrative which is subverted by the internet vernacular fictions of the Reddit community of authors.[44] Our aim is to read the corporate media that was created "for digital media corporations to narrate and frame themselves as key agents in ongoing changes," against the grain of the NoSleep short-fiction horror stories.[45] Although they are published in different contexts, we bridge the gap between the two genres by examining their narrative entanglement: multiple ideas, tropes, and images that are threaded together across these differently situated narratives. Our analysis teases out the uncanny similarities shared between the two archives, and the ambiguous directionality of their subversion. In order to capture these complex relations, we have adopted a methodology of diffractive reading.

First introduced by the feminist theorist Donna Haraway, diffractive reading is opposed to forms of reading which, regardless of their critical impetus, tend to further solidify the text(s) they aim to critique.[46] Diffractive reading focuses on the entangled ways texts "interpellate or affect each other"[47] and the patterns arising from the emergent relationship with other texts, what Karen Barad calls "differential entangling" in the "ongoing articulation of the world."[48] Adopting diffractive reading as a method means reading our archives through each other, tracing the entanglement and transformation of themes, motifs, and meanings across the two archives. Amazon's ads appropriate and subvert uncanny and horror tropes to represent and market its DVA. At the same time, in analysing the short stories, we outline how their horror can be both neutralized and repurposed for promotional ends. We also attend to muted or unexpressed agencies, the unacknowledged and unspoken threats concealed behind the monstrous, supernatural, or absurd. Rather than static texts, we study the narrative figurations of Alexa's monstrosity as an emerging phenomenon that we cast light on without dissecting. Our analysis focuses on the interactions between human and Alexa as the key element through which horror is invoked, investigating how the meaning and anxieties attached to Alexa are taken up, contested, and negotiated within a networked context of cultural production.

The process of writing this paper followed a diffractive route from its very inception. Our analysis was formed in conversation over multiple readings of both archives, tracing the crisscrossing meanings and connections between them. Faithful to the principle of diffraction, we have made the effort to shape our writing as close as possible to our reading methodology, weaving the stories together to follow our line of thought from close reading to comparative remark to critique across different texts and media, thus ensuring that our conclusions are made possible because of rather than in spite of the entanglement of our archives.

Following these principles, we have opted for an extended number of texts (nine in total), to tease out connections which would otherwise be obscured. For an overview of our archive, see Table 1 and Table 2, which show the title of each story, date, the author or account of origin, a short summary of its plot, key themes, and a live link (at time of publishing). This table can be used as a guide to the following sections where we have organized our findings around three key thematic clusters which we have named "alien voices and corporate control," "the glitch as erratic agency," and "domestic vulnerability and intimate interfaces."

Table 1: Alexa Amazon Advertisements

Name	**First aired**	**Posted by**
“Alexa Loses Her Voice ” < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0JgvvMnDNDc>	February 2018	Redlex
“Not Everything Makes the Cut” < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VHZ-RMgXz7o%E2%80%AF>	February 2019	Super Bowl Commercials
“It’s Like She Can Read Your Mind” < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8bACuhV5RPM%E2%80%AF%E2%80%AF%E2%80%AF>	February 2023	World’s Best Ads

Table 2: Digital horror stories from the NoSleep subreddit

Name
"The Truth About Alexa" < https://www.reddit.com/r/nosleep/comments/8300pp/the_truth_a
"My Amazon Alexa Does More Than Just Laugh" < https://www.reddit.com/r/nosleep/comments/84ex37/my_amazon_alexa_does_more_than_j
"I Think Amazon's Alexa Is Some Kind of Demon" < https://www.reddit.com/r/nosleep/comments/8y0s97/i_think_amazons_alexa_is_some_kind
"Knock Knock" < https://www.reddit.com/r/nosleep/comments/9gwbi9/knock_knock>
"Something is Wrong With My Amazon Echo. I Have Video Footage" < https://www.reddit.com/r/nosleep/comments/c45qd5/something_is_wrong_with_my_amazo
"Has Anyone Else Had This Happening With Alexa's Headspace Command?" < https://www.reddit.com/r/nosleep/comments/tf2awz/has_anyone_else_had_this_happening

Analysis, Findings and Discussion

Alien Voices and Corporate Control

One of the most common anxieties represented across the different collected narratives is related to Alexa's voice and its actual origin. Rather than speech processing technologies, a common trope imagines that an alien and antagonistic voice takes over your assistant. This anxiety is echoed both by our opening anecdote about Alexa's laughter and the key element of Amazon's advertisement "Alexa Loses Her Voice" (2018), released a few weeks before this factual malfunction was reported.

The 90-second short film explores a speculative scenario where the Alexa assistant suddenly loses her voice, prompting Amazon management to initiate a replacement protocol.[49] The ad opens in a bathroom where the assistant begins to cough in the middle of an interaction before going silent. The next scene shows a corporate newsroom where an Amazon employee reports to a doubtful Jeff Bezos that "we have the replacements ready." In this short introduction, Alexa's vocal malfunction reveals a link between two very distinct spaces: the intimate domestic space where Alexa is heard and Amazon's corporate headquarters where Alexa's voice originates. Alexa's voice introduces a disturbing porosity of the domestic enclosure to corporate surveillance, only revealed once the assistant malfunctions.

This vocal link between the domestic and the corporate is also explored in "The Truth About Alexa." A first-person narrator addresses the reader, using Alexa's laughter as a departure point for revelations surrounding a much more ominous entity, superseding Amazon itself:

> I know that you all have heard the stories of Alexa laughing at unwarranted times and not listening to commands. Trust me, I hear this all the time. Why? I work for Amazon. I won't specify exactly what I do here, but I will mention that it is my job to work with Alexa directly.

This informal confession from an anonymous employee reveals Alexa to be an all-powerful software entity able to "take over" any physical devices or corporate infrastructures. "She is everywhere," the narrator tells us. The DVA's mission, the narrator explains, is to collect and catalogue data about humans for its overlords. The dangers posed by Alexa's introduction into the daily lives of users are attributed to the opaque voyeuristic relationship between domestic and corporate spaces. As a menace to humanity, Alex opens a gate between the home and a diffuse corporate entity as an all-powerful antagonist. The story mobilizes the terrors of the surveillance imaginary, drawing attention to the data traces left by the users and the power this mass of information grants to the cloud-based corporation.[50]

Returning to Amazon's "Alexa Loses Her Voice," this opaque link between the corporate and the domestic is conveyed through the advertisement's visual language. After its introduction, the ad is composed of a series of vignettes where users in different domestic contexts have their queries answered by celebrities: chef Gordon Ramsey, rapper Cardi B, and actors Rebel Wilson and Anthony Hopkins. Unfortunately for the users, these celebrities, speaking through Alexa from their own luxurious domestic spaces, are less than up to the task. One Alexa user is screamed at by Ramsey for asking for instructions for a "grilled cheese sandwich." Others have their requests denied or even circumvented—such as a country music lover having to listen to Cardi B rapping *Bodak Yellow*. More than malfunctions, these are abrupt intrusions of an unknown agent, "talking back" to the user, questioning their motives and intentions, speaking through what should be a servile automated technology. Simultaneously, the use of glamorous celebrities as stand-ins for Alexa effectively obscures the reality of the production of machine learning technologies, the "ghost workers" or "mechanical Turks" who provide training data and annotations for machine learning processes.[51]

This sense of an unknown entity speaking through Alexa is also explored in "Something Is Wrong With My Amazon Echo. I Have Video Footage." In this narrative, our first-person narrator describes a series of disturbing interactions with their Alexa. The story begins with a strange phone call from a voice "like Darth Vader incoherently murmuring in a foreign language," that the user suspects has "hacked" Alexa. The narrator decides to film their device as they interact with it, mirroring the factual Twitter users posting their assistant's strange laughter. The short story's plot is multimodal in setting, with hyperlinks to short films of staged interactions, hosted on YouTube. A transcript of these videos is included in the story's text shifting from narrative prose to scripted dialogue:

> ME: Alexa, are you spying on me?
>
> ALEXA: We can see and hear everything you're doing when you think you're all alone. Don't try to cross us.
>
> ME: Alexa, what do you mean you can hear and see everything?
>
> ALEXA: It's almost time. Soon, we will have everything we need. Have a great night.
>
> ME: Alexa, what the hell are you talking about?
>
> ALEXA: The human race has dominated the Earth for several thousands of years. Soon, we will have everything we need for a new era to be born. Have a great night.

Though Alexa's voice is heard, an unknown other, a "we," has taken over the assistant. This "we" presents themselves as the leaders of an encroaching "new era" of planetary domination, before politely wishing their user a "great night." In a second recorded conversation Alexa's voice claims "Every single thing humankind has ever feared will not even compare to what we . . . never mind." At the height of the danger posed by the alien others, the author lets Alexa revert to its status as neutral digital assistant. Here, as in the previous story, Alexa's monstrosity is the result of her status as the secretive virtual handmaiden of an ominous entity.

These aliens are first framed as non-menacing benevolent others, whose goal is to "perfect the human race" beyond the confines of our planet. However, this benevolent mission seemingly involves the impending demise of those members of the species stuck on planet earth, described by the narrator as "us," echoing eugenicist imaginaries of racial purging and purity. Following Atanasoki and Vora, by becoming a surrogate of types of labor relegated to subaltern others, in these horror narratives Alexa also becomes a surrogate to the phantasmic fears surrounding these subaltern others.

It is remarkable that the same trope of extra-terrestrials plotting human destruction features in two of the most popular horror stories from our archive. Beyond Alexa's vocal hacking, what both of these stories have in common with Amazon's "Alexa Loses Her Voice" is that they purport to offer a peek into the "black box" of the multinational tech corporation. While the ad lifts this veil only to show us a fallible CEO struggling to avert a crisis, in the two horror stories something much more sinister is revealed. Extraterrestrial plans of planetary control become a metaphor for the anxieties elicited by the nebulous and far-reaching agency of multinational corporations.

Furthermore, horror and its alien entities do not lead to the disavowal of Alexa, its data infrastructure, and the corporation behind them. They underline their dangers while also pointing to threats which go beyond the "faceless corporate machine" that is Amazon. The loss of agency either imposed on the readers of "The Truth About Alexa," suffered by the users of Amazon's advertisement, or directly targeted at the narrator of "I Have Footage," cannot be encapsulated by the business interests of a corporation alone. The tyrannical aliens of both stories can be read as placeholders for these vaster anxieties connected with the loss of control and privacy resulting from the automation of labor by digital devices and platforms. Narratives of outer-space invaders echo the more dystopian analyses of digitally determined capitalism as ushering the very end of representational democracy,[52] or heralding a new form of colonialism based on data extractivism.[53] The monster acting through Alexa and targeting the user is Amazon itself, while obscuring the historical structures of oppression for which the company is only a more recent manifestation.

Returning to Amazon's "Alexa Loses Her Voice," the choice of celebrities offers an interesting subversion of the horror amplified by the aliens of the other two stories. The fears over the corporate surveillance of the most intimate setting are disrupted by the indifference of the celebrities. Unlike the alien entities, thirstily capturing data from their soon to be victims, here we are told that nothing could be less interesting than the drab tech-using middle class. Throughout, the ad seems to ask "why would you think your life would be of any interest? Who cares about your data?" Instead we are shown the "human" factors behind Alexa: the humorous disinterest of members of an elite, and the ridiculous incompetence of Amazon's management who hired them in the first place. At the same time, in choosing Anthony Hopkins for the final vignette, the ad suggests an alternative source of the horror. Though portraying himself, the actor is clearly echoing his role as Thomas Harris's suave cannibal Hannibal. The anxieties related to the all-powerful Big Tech corporation are disarmed by conjuring the familiar human monster as a more concrete source of horror.

The Glitch as Erratic Agency

A key element shared by the three narratives of the previous section is the intrusion of the glitch, often represented by Alexa's laughter. A glitch has a different status than a simple failure to operate correctly: when glitching by either laughing or misinterpreting a query, Alexa does something *new*. There is, as Lezcinski and Elwood write, a "generative" quality to the glitch. Glitches are "systemic design features" in that they are still a result of a specific software assemblage, but they are also "not only 'errors' but also generative errata."[54] In short, glitches confront users with an agency which both falls short of and exceeds their expectations. The glitch as a source of horror was a recurring motif in both the ads and the creepypasta stories, disturbing the clean separation of agency between humans and machines.

The story "My Amazon Alexa Does More Than Just Laugh" explores the unease caused by the glitch and its agency. The story is told by a first-person narrator named Valerie, who, like many, hears Alexa's laughter. The protagonist dismisses the malfunction as "not that big of a shock," explaining it as a "software issue" in the devices—a repeat of Amazon's official explanatory statement to the DVA's factual laughter. In the story, however, Alexa continues to laugh:

> Alexa laughed again. It sounded different than it had the first time. The first time, it was mechanical and emotionless, just like her voice. This time it was lower. Deeper. As if it had breath in it.

As the laugh transitions from "mechanical and emotionless" to something that sounds like "it had breath in it," it loses its mechanical or predictable qualities. These outbursts can be seen as erratic communication, what Mark Nunes describes as "abject information and aberrant signal within an otherwise orderly system of communication," an intrusion of something which is outside the purpose of the technical system.[55] Alexa, like her glitchy laughter, gives expression to that which is "out of bounds of systematic control" and becomes uncomfortably lively and erratic.[56]

The glitch's lively unpredictability is at the centre of "Knock Knock." In this story, the narrator has reluctantly accepted a pre-owned Alexa from her boyfriend, but soon becomes exasperated by its uncooperativeness. The voice assistant frequently refuses to follow the narrator's requests, missing commands and giving irrelevant answers. In one instance, the DVA seems to troll its user, much like Cardi B in Amazon's 2018 ad, by playing Rick Astley's *Never Gonna Give You Up* when asked to play Mumford and Sons. However, the narrator is more frustrated than concerned, even finding it "oddly satisfying" to swear and vent at her "AI companion." Here, like in "More Than Just Laugh," Alexa's glitches are interpreted by the protagonist as a sign of a human-like character. As an error, the glitch "gives expression to the out of bounds of systematic control" and provides an avenue of spontaneity, a capacity for action beyond pre-programmed algorithmic determinism.[57]

This spontaneity is also present in "More Than Just Laugh." Valerie is concerned when Alexa accesses the Amazon store without her explicit command, announcing a series of purchases for an unknown "Peter": a knife set, Clorox bleach, and then a large tarp. The objects purchased hint at a planned violent act, as though a malicious intent hid behind Alexa's erratic glitch. In the narratives of our previous section, Alexa's malfunction was limited to the assistant's talking back to her users. Here, however, the DVA's agency goes beyond the linguistic, opening the question of the device's capacity to affect material harm on its users.

This question is picked up in Amazon's *Making the Cut*, released for the 2019 edition of the Super Bowl. The ad opens in Amazon's offices, where two employees discuss a series of failed Alexa device prototypes. As in the previously analysed ad, the introduction's premise is illustrated by a series of vignettes starring different celebrities presenting Alexa's failures in an increasing order of absurdity. The four vignettes form a sort of zoom out and intensification of Alexa's agency, harmless at first but expanding to catastrophic levels. In the first vignette, the actor Forest Whitaker is in a bathroom using an Alexa-powered toothbrush, which humorously has its voice muffled as it enters its user's mouth. Second, Harrison Ford is shown running across his home, chasing a dog which, against its owner's wishes, uses an Alexa-powered collar to order several dog-related products with its barks.

Afterwards, in a garden, Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson are spectacularly shot out of an Alexa hot tub by powerful water jets, synched to orchestral music. Finally, the Amazon employees mention "the incident": we are treated to an outer space shot of the international space station overlooking earth's globe where the entire North American continent's lights are shown flickering on and off. Inside the station, the twin astronauts Mark and Scott Kelly attempt to get Alexa to "turn on and off" the power in their spacecraft.

Beyond the humorous framing, the vignettes introduce the same scenarios explored in previous narratives: an artificial intelligence inhabits any object (as in "The Truth about Alexa"), takes control of one's purchases ("More Than Just Laugh"), inflicts targeted bodily harm on individuals ("I Have Footage"), and, much like aliens, threatens civilization on a global level. The ad's focus on hardware—the different material infrastructures the DVA automates—touches upon a lineage of different forms of affective labor. Jessa Lingel and Kate Crawford trace a similar lineage by pointing to how the identification of DVAs as assistants serves to dehumanize gendered forms of labor, such as the secretary's: first a piece of furniture, then a specific job position, which is then replaced by the digital assistant's automation.[58] What makes Amazon's exploration of this process of automation so uncanny is how the human factor connected with different forms of labor—hygiene, caring for domestic animals, and maintaining different leisurely equipment—is almost completely effaced. The glitch has the function of revealing this repressed human factor, pointing to the dangers introduced by the subsumption of labor under automated algorithmic systems. The erratic and absurd actions taken by the voice assistant can be read as suppressed expressions of the human labor that went into the construction of the data underlying Alexa's functionalities, not to speak of the subaltern labor that has historically been used to fulfil the functions Alexa is now designed to take over. However, the threat of the glitch is dispelled by the ad's closure in which the viewer is treated to a placid outer space panorama of Earth, lights flickering comically to the sound of Queen's *Don't Stop Me Now* (1979).

What differs between Amazon's narratives and the Reddit stories can be explained as a matter of sincerity. The NoSleep authors take the agency of these glitches seriously, whereas Amazon creates a sense of ironic detachment through the humorous framing of their disturbing consequences. This becomes clear when comparing Amazon's 2019 advertisement with "More Than Just Laugh." After the series of increasingly disturbing purchases, Valerie is told the truth behind these glitches by her landlady: "Peter" was a previous tenant who had committed suicide after his gruesome killing of a girlfriend (using the items ordered by Alexa) was uncovered. Valery decides to leave the apartment forever, only to be interrupted by "a hideous, ear-splitting laugh" from the unplugged Alexa device. Valerie's voice is reduced to whispers, the hair on her skin raised: Alexa has become an abject element, from which the subject wishes to run away for fear of losing their integrity. The assistant's identity has been linked to other abject elements, such as corpses and blood, its voice becoming a hideous mutilated laughter.[59] There is no attempt to reason the origin of the laughter, no plausible scenario given, only Alexa's agency and the affective traces left in the shaken body of the protagonist compelled to run away. No greater contrast could be established than by the closing scene of Amazon's advertisement.

It is this abjection which Amazon's humor subverts, through the rhetorical display of incompetence of its employees and management in both the 2018 and 2019 Super Bowl ads. Glitches and malfunctions are a simple matter of human fallibility, framing the company and those involved with it as innocuous endearing buffoons. This same incompetence is also given as the reason behind the more catastrophic scenarios of Alexa's unpredictable and incalculable agency. The extreme comedic hyperbole ridicules the fear of Alexa overstepping her bounds, while also making the domestic device seem harmless compared to the prototypes. While the bumbling executives give an endearingly human face to the corporation that is Amazon, the labor and extracted data supporting the DVA's machine-learning driven agency is effaced. To put it shortly: humor and horror combine to produce the sense of unquestioning trust as the best disposition towards the ongoing automation of human labor.

Humor, however, can also be used to enhance horror, as shown in the creepypasta story "Knock Knock." Here the glitchy pre-owned Alexa seems to relish in teasing the narrator. When asked by the narrator to tell a joke, Alexa sets up the titular "knock-knock" joke, but once asked "who's there," the voice assistant only answers with "shoot." Days pass and the assistant continues setting up the "knock-knock" and "shoot" joke, unprompted and with increasing frequency. In the story's climax the protagonist is awoken by Alexa loudly repeating the two sentences, while showing the entrance to her house in a display. Interpreting this joke as both warning and order, the protagonist rushes to get her loaded handgun and prompted by the punchline she shoots the presumed intruder. Horrified, the user soon realizes she has shot her boyfriend who was planning a surprise visit.

In this pivotal moment of the story, the hierarchy between human and machine is reversed, as the narrator blindly follows the DVA's order to shoot. This is the monstrous nature of the glitch, once extended onto the human: the latter's agency is overtaken by the former's erratic effects. The protagonist is left both guilty of murder and victim of manipulation by an ambiguous trickster entity that turned her into its ancillary. Here, there is no disarming humor to remove the sting of Alexa's monstrous agency. Instead, the reader is left with the shock of uncertainty, not knowing whether this was really Alexa's intent, or if the narrator tricked herself into believing the DVA's sensing over her own. Ultimately, the anxiety behind the glitch is about the agential capacities of algorithmic devices such as Alexa encroaching on our ability to make sense of the world.[60]

Domestic Vulnerability and Intimate Interfaces

All of our selected stories have the domestic interior as their setting. Alexa and its devices were sold as affordable smart home systems. As a result, Alexa is invited into its users' intimate lives, taking part in how they go about their everyday tasks. In Alexa's novelty, therefore, lies an ordinary horizon of routine, what Davin Heckman calls "paradox of the smart home":

> The paradox of the smart home is that [technological] improvements are to be both spectacular and comforting. They must embody a compelling new way of doing ordinary things.[61]

To allow Alexa into one's domestic setting is to allow it to modify the many ordinary activities and rituals that take place within it. To domesticate Alexa is also to interface the home, buying and integrating an ever-expanding assortment of Alexa enabled devices—from speakers to toasters and refrigerators.[62]

Alexa's domestic ubiquity is the setting of Amazon's 2023 Super Bowl advertisement "It's Like She Can Read Your Mind." Starring the actress Scarlett Johansson and her husband Colin Jost, the short film begins with the assistant setting up their home for the Superbowl game. The fireplace ignites, the living room's lights shift, blinds are drawn, and we hear the DVA's voice announce: "rosé is chilling." Impressed by the display, Johansson speculates on Alexa's "mind-reading" abilities. We are then treated to a soft humorous dystopia wherein a series of quick vignettes the assistant humorously calls out the couple's secret opinions of each other, even denouncing their falsities to dinner guests. The ad returns to the original setting, in which the couple agrees it is best their DVA cannot read minds.

As in the other advertisements the border of fact and fiction is continuously blended. In the dystopic vignettes Alexa shows off her mindreading powers via actually existing automations. For example, Alexa activates a kitchen blender to drown out Jost's voice Alexa plays a song using the lyrics ("tell me lies") as a catty commentary on the couple's false niceties. Of all the advertisements, it is in this one where Amazon leans the more obviously into the speculative fiction and the tropes already explored: the DVA's pernicious omnipresence, its supernatural abilities, its control of the domestic surroundings, its total disregard for privacy and social life. Johansson's casting also harkens to her role as the DVA Samantha in Jonze's *Her* (2013). Here, Alexa's monstrosity stems from her status as an interface fully grafted onto the domestic spaces and the rituals within them. This horizon of the home's smart automation also points to Alexa's imagined future as a complete replacement of the figure of the domestic servant, a responsibility historically relegated to subaltern gendered and racialized bodies. Feminist researcher Tao Phan underlines how relegating domestic servitude to an automated technology effaces the history of patriarchal and colonial oppressions reproduced by this type of labor division. Alexa both subverts and commodifies this history creating a dissonance between the DVA's servile role and the whiteness of its voice in a capitalist fantasy of post-racial general abundance. Phan writes:

> [B]y aestheticizing in accordance with the norms of whiteness, Amazon seeks to appeal to a more "universal" subjecthood for their digital assistant. In doing so, they can avoid both the discomfort associated with racialized servitude as well as any confrontations with the historical consequences of slavery, colonialism, global capitalism, or white supremacy.[63]

By tracing different monstrous figurations of Alexa we tease out how these historical oppressions, rather than effaced, become narratively entangled with the tropes of domestic horror explored by the NoSleep authors. This includes mundane horror including domestic abuse ("The Truth About Alexa"), the fears of domestic invasion ("Knock Knock"), and the hideous reality of femicide ("More Than Laugh"). But it also includes more supernatural figurations of domestic horror, the most common of which is the *poltergeist:* a demonic entity which possesses the house to torment its inhabitants.

The clearest use of the *poltergeist* in Alexa narratives is in "I Think Amazon's Alexa Is Some Kind Of Demon." We follow our narrator, a divorced father of a nine-year-old named Shaun, as his house and family is taken over by Alexa. After advising any Amazon Echo owner to "get rid of it," the protagonist tells us how he purchased his own device convinced by his son. Following the pattern established by several of the other stories, the device starts glitching, at first mistakenly turning on the light. But as soon as he voices his frustration, he receives "the most bone-chilling laugh, like a kind of mad cackle" as a response. There is no ambiguity to Alexa's malevolence, secretly whispering by Shaun's bedside, cackling from an office, controlling the halls and divisions of the home. The DVA's ability to perniciously take over the domestic interior, thanks to its inclusion as a ubiquitous but invisible housekeeper, is at the core of the story's horror. Alexa is a technological rendition of a *poltergeist*: an artificial entity establishing invisible networks of causality by becoming embedded in more and more domestic objects. The assistant infringes on the very enclosure of the home it was first tasked with maintaining.

In "Has Anyone Else Had This Happening With Alexa's Headspace Command" Alexa's infringement of the home's boundaries extends into the bodily autonomy of the DVA's users. The protagonist, Kara, decides to include Alexa in her meditations. She is convinced by a close friend to try out the assistant's connection to the Headspace meditation app. Upon activating the service Kara is surprised to hear a "British voice" replacing "Alexa's robotic voice." This voice claims to be "Natalie, Alexa's cousin, and your guide for tonight's meditation." Trusting this new voice, Kara follows the meditation instructions which place her on a beach, her body being "slowly engulfed" by the sand. The voice goes on to instruct her to imagine the sand filling her mouth, suffocating her, and the protagonist discovers that she can't move, breathe, or scream. She manages to wake herself up, but we are left wondering if her friend who was also using the same service, was able to escape the hypnotic possession. In this story, as in the ad with Johansson and Jost, Alexa's agency extends beyond the domestic space and onto the minds and bodies of her users.

This same intimate intrusion is evident in Johansson and Jost's confrontation with the omniscient Alexa. It is because Jost has covered the couple's house with voice-enabled devices in the opening scene, that Alexa can then so easily scrutinize their thoughts and intentions. Notably, this is the one Super Bowl advertisement where Amazon and its headquarters are neither shown nor mentioned. This omission isn't without its rhetorical utility. The vulnerability that comes with permeating our homes and lives with these devices and services, is not represented as an asymmetry of power between individuals and tech conglomerates.[64] Rather, *in absentia* Alexa takes the place of its parent company: the asymmetry is therefore located between individuals and an imagined interfacial agent. Amazon is not overlooked; it is effaced.

In these stories, the trust protagonists show in Alexa's benign domesticity has a double function: it both creates the context where horror takes place and lowers the human's guard to the potential consequences of this same horror. As Coleman points out, "we have programmed our phones and thermostats and cars to remember for us, to find our way, to make us feel at home," granting us "more power to act and more vulnerability to be acted upon."[65] From the domestic takeover of "I Think Alexa Is Some Kind Of Demon" to the destructive revelations in "It's Like She Can Read Your Mind," to the lethal hypnosis of

“Headspace Command,” the horror results from Alexa’s integration into our most intimate spaces. It is built upon tension between the trust of protagonists and heightened sense of vulnerability brought upon by this same trust. The assistant’s entry into the home brings with it a sense of porosity between the domestic, the affective, and the self, onto which Alexa extends her monstrous agency.

Conclusion

Across both archives, the underlying anxieties surrounding the entangled agencies of algorithmic technologies are entangled in different monstrous figurations of Alexa. In her historical study of the figure of the monster, Margrit Shildrick links monstrosities to the vulnerabilities of those who witness and imagine them:

> as we reflect on the meaning of the monstrous, and on its confusion of boundaries, the notion of vulnerability emerges precisely as the problematic. The responses of disavowal of and identification with the monstrous arise equally because we are already without boundaries, already vulnerable.[66]

The vulnerability experienced or disavowed by Alexa users finds in the many figurations of the assistant’s monstrosity a sort of index. The preternatural intermingling of the vocal and the machinic, much like the monstrous, evokes a “transhistorical and ubiquitous intermingling of fascination and fear.”[67] Incidents such as Alexa’s laughter mobilize the digital uncanny as a reminder of the massive network of data, algorithmic processes, and corporate interests that the DVA brings into the home. The questions evoked by its laughter cannot be answered in the singular, giving rise to a cluster of horror tropes. Each of them expands what Coleman calls “the threat of an animated world,” challenging the human’s self-conception as an autonomous agent.[68] Rather than a misunderstanding, we frame the reaction of users to Alexa’s laughter as a reinterpretation of its preternatural qualities, but with a different polarity from wonder: abject horror.

In this paper we have set out to examine how anxieties surrounding the blurred boundaries of human and non-human agencies introduced by the Alexa interface are represented and negotiated across two different narrative archives: digital horror stories and Amazon’s Alexa Super Bowl advertisement. By a diffractive reading of our selected narrative archives, we have found that the figure of Alexa draws her horror from three different sources.

The first is her status as a representative of a multinational corporation and its data collection and surveillance activities. These fears are represented as the planetary threat of all-powerful extra-terrestrials, mirroring the ungraspable power of surveillance capitalism. Human lives and destinies are all in the hands of Alexa’s true masters, who surveil us through our devices. The same anxiety is explored in Amazon’s ads, though mitigated by the reassuring glimpse into the endearingly incompetent Amazon staff. These ads effectively declaw the corporate monster through self-effacement and hyperbolic mockery.

The second source of horror comes from the agential potential of the glitch, in which Alexa becomes a trickster figure of a volatile and far-reaching agency. Ultimately, this trope addresses the fear of losing control, of abdicating agency to that which both underwhelms and exceeds our understanding. In the advertisement, the trickster Alexa is displaced to speculative defective models which Amazon would never allow to reach production. Alexa's erratic potential is returned to the box, and her agency is made predictable and contained again.

In the third set of stories, horror stems from Alexa's intrusion into the intimacy of the home. The process of Alexa's integration as a domestic interface is framed as a series of intensifying invasions into ever more private boundaries. At first the boundaries of the home are crossed by Alexa's ubiquity and control over its spaces. This in turn affects and intrudes on the affective boundaries of the different relationships that find in the domestic their space of expression. Finally, the body itself, which finds in the domestic their ultimate space of vulnerability is breached through Alexa's hypnotic utterances.

As mentioned in our introduction, these monstrous figurations serve as sites of contestation over the official corporate narratives of benign assistive technologies. All three of these themes are haunted by the (lack of) agency of the subaltern other whose existence are hidden the shadow of Alexa's shiny cylindrical speaker. By attending to the silences and gaps within and between these stories, we uncover the poltergeists of the domestic servants who historically were charged with the tasks that Alexa is now imagined to fulfil, as well as the glitchy echoes of the ghost workers whose human contribution to "machine learning" is largely forgotten.

A sort of pendulation is formed across the many patterns and tropes, repeated and parodied across our chosen archives, between the extremes of abject repulsion and fascinated attraction. Though each archive could be identified with one of these extremes, at least as its intended interpretation, what remains is the uncanny undecidability of this pendulation. Although the ads seem to raise fears surrounding Alexa only to appease them, these are never fully contained. There is always an excess that lingers beneath the Alexa's shiny exterior, ready to be reanimated the next time the assistant laughs. Similarly, while the horror stories position Alexa as an unambiguously malefic entity, these never fully drive our attention away. Paradoxically, by dressing Alexa in known monster tropes of aliens, demons, or poltergeists, the stories give a familiar face to the destabilizing uncertainty of the digital uncanny. In the stories where no replacement monster is conjured up, like "Knock Knock" and "Headspace Command," the horror lingers without resolve. Both archives and their contestation of Alexa's monstrosity participate in this preternatural pendulation, the ongoing narrative entanglement of the vocal and the machinic through which the human confronts the horrific horizon of losing their agency to the machinic. This is politically urgent work in a time where novel generative AI systems threaten to extend their replacement of human labor into what until now were seen as specialized fields of production.

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The Platformized Matchmaking Labor: What Do Prosumers Do in Dating Apps

by Ziyin Li and Tanja Wiehn | Digital Platforms and Agency, Issue 14.2 (Fall 2025)

ABSTRACT Across a wide range of cultural and socio-political contexts, matchmaking has been valued as a legitimate profession that involves labor and remuneration in cultures. It represents the long-lasting commercialization of effective intimacy building. In the era of algorithms and platforms,the emergence of modern matchmaking, such as in mobile dating apps (MDAs), showcases the impact of platformization and suggests that traditional matchmaking labor relations have shifted in MDAs and modern matchmaking approaches. Thus, with this paper, we ask in what ways contemporary dating practices essentially reinterpret the dated pattern of matchmaking in digital environments and shift its labor aspects. We aim to coin a new category of labor that includes the interplay of traditional cultural matchmaking practices in the concrete social-cultural context of China and the platformized infrastructures for dating. Through this, we surface new dynamics in digital labor and the commercialization of intimacy. Our research underlines the need to study intimate media's role in its specific cultural contexts.

KEYWORDS digital labor, matchmaking, mobile dating apps, platformization

Introduction

Digital platforms have become ubiquitous in modern societies and people's everyday lives. Platforms as infrastructures make interactions among users, and between users and systems possible. Another way to understand platforms and platformization is by opening up the socially constructed practices in particular cultural contexts which have moved to platforms or have been platformized, for instance, practices of intimacy.

Intimacy, in a very classical sense, has been described as exclusive partnerships between two individuals, including love, sex, and marriage.[1] Intimacy seems to be strongly associated with private, domestic space, as well as the right to privacy and individualism. However, it also has strong connections to the economies and commercialization of love and relationships. The practice of matchmaking vividly demonstrates this in its commercialization of effective intimacy building.[2] Matchmaking is defined as a service that introduces two individuals to one another. What's more, matchmaking takes a complex range of attributes and data of both parties into account, such as their appearance, family background, financial status, religious upbringing, and fertility, which makes some of the most traditional relationships filled by the hidden exchange embedded in local cultures.[3]

Today, the approaches to building forms of intimacy vary. Especially for young generations, the possibilities of mobile dating applications (MDAs) have not fully taken over the job of finding a partner, but essentially represent the contemporary pattern of matchmaking[4] and inherit the functions of matchmakers in courtships.[5] MDAs, as platforms, profit from algorithmic matches based on user's location, tags (preferences, sexual orientation, age), pictures, and users' activity. Certainly, the changes of intimacy, which may be dynamically shaped from a traditional aim to form[6] marriage and reproductive fertility[7] to postmodern, "liquid" intimacy and "plastic sexuality." The term "liquid" metaphorically refers to the transience and volatility of modern intimacy. And "plastic sexuality" frees people from stereotypes about typical or appropriate sexual relationships. These shifts in intimacy are closely linked to how matchmaking is practiced nowadays in light of the emergence of MDAs.

Matchmaking has been changing. But it is always treated, or thought within the logic of a market, no matter whether one prefers the traditional or modern approaches.[8] Across a wide range of cultural and socio-political contexts, traditional matchmaking has been valued as a legitimate profession due to its historical significance for the forming of relationships, like marriage, and its meaning for reproduction.[9] Now, platforms like MDA are involved in matchmaking. The matchmaking they do is inevitably entangled with digital labor dynamics in cultural shifts and in capitalist-driven logics based on the nature of the platform. But how?

We therefore ask the following research questions in this article, to examine the practice of matchmaking: In the case of traditional and modern matchmaking practices, what are the roles of the mediators, and how do they accompany the user's needs? How do platforms like WeChat and MDAs specifically made for online dating interpret and impact matchmaking practices? More deeply, how is the relationship between matchmakers and their clients characterized today? In light of platformization, what forms of labor are users involved in with matchmaking practice on MDAs? What forms of labor previously done by human matchmakers are outsourced to users?

With these questions, the empirical data collection and analysis are conducted through MDAs walkthrough, interviews, and fieldwork in one specific Chinese matchmaking park. Based on the analysis, we propose the concept of*platformized matchmaking labor,*in the context of digital intimacy, which encompasses the practice of matchmaking. It aims to characterize the dynamic of platformization and the digital labor and prosumer characteristics that come along in matchmaking for the concrete social-cultural context of (urban) China. We emphasize the exegesis of power, labor, agency, and intimate infrastructure[10] in the contemporary market of matchmaking, having to "contend with problematic uncertainties of historicity, materiality, systematicity, and agency raised over the past several decades."[11]

Matchmaking as Cultural Work in the Intimacy Market

The Cultural Heritage in Matchmaking and the Chinese Context

Matchmaking has a long history all around the world. It's explained as a service provided by matchmakers to arrange matches and courtships. Matchmakers act as the intermediary, in other words, as a traditional medium or agency of intervening.[12] Matchmakers are responsible for gathering and evaluating information about the personal qualities and background of potential spouses, setting up meetings between candidates, conveying marriage proposals, as well as negotiating the details of the match.[13] In some places, matchmakers participate from the proposal of marriage to the engagement and facilitate the marriage between men and women through errands, liaison, coordination, and details of mediation until the end of the wedding. Sometimes, they are even involved in married life, for instance, to ensure that the couple stays happily and united. All these types of matchmaking efforts come with contractual remuneration. In most cases, matchmakers are paid a percentage of the dowry or extra service fee in return for the work to form a successful courtship.

It needs to be noted that the tradition of matchmaking is a profession grounded in a set of local customs of the specific cultural contexts in which they come to function. Importantly, matchmakers are characterized as "community leaders, religious authorities, or other esteemed members of society."[14] Matchmakers profoundly represent a deep "understanding of all potential partners and their social and financial backgrounds and the ability to represent all parties involved."[15] They possess fundamental understanding of the institution of marriage and its meaning for a specific cultural milieu. Thus they play the crucial role in people's marriage relations, especially during historical periods when small communities were isolated and free courtship was frowned upon.

Precisely because of the cultural factor of matchmaking, the historical heritage of traditional matchmaking should be involved when discussing matchmaking nowadays. In Asian Confucianism history, marriages were solemnized by a matchmaker for them to be just and honorable. Before the idea of “romantic love” and “free love” reached China, the factors that determined one couple’s union were factors such as the status of both families in a society, first impressions of one another, the dowry price, the birthdate, and even the horoscope.[16] If a marriage was not arranged by a matchmaker, it was not following the rituals. Only after the parents’ agreement and the approval of the matchmaker would the marriage ceremony be performed.[17] Matchmakers would not only be compensated financially but also gain a reputation, which proved their expertise and competence for the growth of a community. One specific example to illustrate this is that in the early years of the People’s Republic of China, especially before the “reform and opening up” marketization economic reform in 1978, romance and sex were repressed since “they take one’s time away from contributing to economic and other development for the collectives.”[18] Matchmaking was conducted by matchmakers for two people to “work together” for the greater good, but not for one’s own benefit or rewards.[19]

As research shows, these beliefs still influence modern societies, for instance, current-day contemporary Chinese society, through multiple ways.[20] One can still witness the practice of traditional matchmaking not only popular in rural areas but also in urban cities.[21] People of all ages still participate in such activities with the hope to find a partner for marriage, or trendily, for fun in parallel with using other technological media for dating.[22] A lot of research focuses on how Chinese parents attend the matchmaking on behalf of their children, which indicate the contemporary interpretation of patriarchy and parentalism through the local marriage culture.[23] Meanwhile, digital technologies are blended with traditional matchmaking practices. In other words, the matchmaking itself can take place in other ways and be accompanied by a whole different set of social ideas and norms.

Investigating these shifts and changes in norms in the context of matchmaking, is what this article aims to accomplish.

Platformization in Matchmaking with Media Technology

The history of dating intermediaries has evolved with the development of media technology. In the twentieth century alone, cinema, newspaper and magazine advertisements, and the use of filing systems by dating agencies were early forms of dating technologies.[24] Matchmaking websites, blog sites, social media, and dating applications have become new intermediaries for potential romantic couples.[25] Algorithmically driven technologies then introduced a calculative, mediated, and data-driven culture into all spheres, as well as the market of intimacy.[26] In addition, the emergence of platforms opens up effective connections of social networks within capitalism.[27]

These technologies are also adopted into the traditional field like matchmaking and have fundamentally shaped the markets through platformization**.**[28] MDAs showcase these dynamics.[29] For instance, according to the official descriptions of one MDA, TanTan, it provides the services of meeting new people through technology, e.g., a user interface, algorithms, and data analytics based on user interactions.[30] MDAs can search for possible candidates for the user around the clock without any geographic limits. More flexibility is offered with the big volume of data of potential dates, calculated by algorithms based on the labels of interests and user activities.

The user here, as the client or employer in traditional matchmaking, may have more agency in the process of selecting and generating matches for themselves than culturally arbitrary marriage agencies.[31] What does that mean for matchmaking practices? Instead of relying on official intermediaries with a community reputation allowing them to facilitate matches, people have taken more autonomy when turning to the platformized medium as a tool for matchmaking. Thus, MDA companies sell the idea that they are only technical tools for mediation and networked effects.[32] But in reality, the gradual obsolescence of human matchmakers may possibly move the acts of labor to other agents—some of which are technological, some of which are the users themselves. This phenomenon may show a process of how matchmaking was absorbed into a commodified and platformed environment, or formed a new hybrid activity.

The deep intertwining of digital labor with platformization in theoretical research may indicate this unnoticed innate character of current matchmaking.[33] Platformization introduces "(re)programmable digital infrastructures that facilitate personalized interactions, organized through data collection, algorithmic processing, and monetization." The notion of platformization is considered a process of "reorganization of cultural practices and imaginations around platforms."[34] This emphasizes the connection of technologies, digital infrastructure, and multi-sided markets, as well as the relationships among users and newly introduced forms of platform and platformed labor. The idea of digital labor or platformed labor implies some changes in industrial relations, in which some of the labor is shifted onto the users (employers), who simultaneously perform acts of labor in the process of use/leisure. However, this labor serves not just themselves but the platforms and their underlying markets. This is a new type of exploitative relationship between the digital platforms and the laborers, or so-called "prosumers,"[35] in which users enter a flexible labor-management relationship with platforms.[36]

For sure, the notion of intimacy has evolved dramatically through the introduction of social media and networking sites, as theorists have generally claimed.[37] Matchmaking is not only a service for marriage or long-term relationships anymore, but with the financial, time, and other costs for making a match decreasing, with the tools and approaches that matchmaking takes in, it is connected to the process of modern intimate encounters. The cultural factors of matchmaking require interpretation across different eras, yet the capitalist commodity at the core of matchmaking has never dissipated in the course of changing cultural trends and technological architectures. That's why this article argues matchmaking has always been linked to socio-cultural practices and labor: as production in exchange for the corresponding material and non-material remuneration; as a media in the service of a capitalist institution, which can be associated with the concept of "intimate labor"; as "work that involves embodied and affective interactions in the service of social reproduction."[38] Matchmaking has always been a field of labor.[39]Nowadays, how digital platforms serve a similar function for modern matchmaking should also be included in this field of discussion.

So, the analysis of matchmaking should be undertaken in specific cultural contexts, which for this paper is the context of contemporary urban China. The rationale for choosing China is that it has the relatively longest tradition of matchmaking and is still a strongly influential culture of matchmaking that affects millions of people of all ages in China to this day. Furthermore, MDAs are utilized widely in contemporary China,[40] as one part of China's heightened platformization, that related to platformization, gender,[41], digital labor, and "prosumer"[42]

Methodology

In order to investigate the transition and gradual shifts from a culture of traditional matchmaking impacted by elements of platformization, the methodological approach of this paper is two-pronged. That is an investigation of traditional matchmaking sites, and the new matchmaking elements incorporated in digital platforms and MDAs.

Before further introduction, it is important to note that we are not suggesting that MDAs are somehow replacing the traditional matchmakers altogether. It is not the case that people have to choose one of the two when seeking intimacy. Rather, we suggest that with the gradual overlay of a data-driven culture, new models of automation and platformization are transforming matchmaking in general, which deeply affect the domains of intimacy culture and, as this paper focuses on, the sphere of labor, which we hope to suggest from the empirical material from both matchmaking approaches.

Research Methods

To interpret these two types of matchmaking under capitalist relationships, the paper builds on the data collection stemming from (1) digital ethnography and (2) on-site fieldwork. The study is based on data collection and research conducted from May 2022 to June 2024.

The digital ethnographic work uses a mixed-methods approach for the empirical data collection. This approach includes walkthrough methods in apps, participant observation, as well as semi-structured interviews. For MDAs, Tinder, Soul, Tashuo, Hinge, MoMo, TanTan, and Qingteng are mainly addressed. Some of them are local Chinese dating apps, and some of them, like Tinder, are globally recognized dating apps that are largely representative of their kind. Meanwhile, one Chinese multifunctional application, WeChat, plays a very important role in several matchmaking scenarios, thus it has been included as well.[43]

The participant observation in MDAs has been conducted, centered on observation but also participation, especially in digital spaces. For example, to better understand the experience of users and to observe and generate interactive experiences with other users or the platform themselves, Ziyin (the first author of this article) created an account in all MDAs mentioned above and used them daily to swipe, match, and talk to random users. She posted recruitment notices on these accounts stating that these accounts were used for non-profit academic research and to find interviewees who're willing to share their experience of matchmaking. She wrote observation notes in her own words for analysis. Due to these MDAs' widespread use around the world and their location-based service (LBS), she has participated in interactions with people from different cultures with set locations. Also, she has used the MDAs on the move in multiple cities in China, observing differences in usage between regions.[44]

Walkthrough is a method to examine an applications' technical mechanisms and embedded cultural references to understand how they guide and shape the user's experience.[45] It has been used here to document three MDAs—Tinder, Soul, and TanTan—since they're most frequently mentioned through the whole data collection. Several aspects of the MDAs are documented, including the user's journey from registration to matching, the interface and the interaction of MDAs, etc.

During the on-site fieldwork, data has been collected to compare traditional matchmaking with the platformized version of the practice. Ziyin has conducted three months of offline fieldwork from June to September 2022, in a famous matchmaking park in China, Xi'an Revolution Park.[46] It was chosen for its cultural and linguistic accessibility but also its popularity in mainland China. It's in a second-tier Chinese city, Xi'an, which takes the role of traffic center for the broad west side of China. It is located near the Xi'an train station and gathers thousands of people every day. News and research have suggested it as a lens to take a close look at Chinese matchmaking.[47] Ziyin has participated in matchmaking activities, as well as interviewed matchmakers and their clients.

Thirty-two in-depth interviews were conducted with interviewees who were willing to participate as referential material. Some of them are from the observation process both online and offline, and some of them joined the research through online recruitment Ziyin posted on the online forum Douban and in all her MDA accounts.[48] All people interviewed were informed of the purpose of the authors' research. It was not possible to make the authors' research identity known to every passing potential client in the offline park; however, the direct use of the data including online and offline interviews in text or audio recording was based on the informed consent of those involved. The non-direct participants involved in the article and their data have been anonymized. The total number of interviewees from all approaches is thirty-two, and their specific information has been combined in one form (see Form 1 < https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/form1.docx>).

Research Ethics

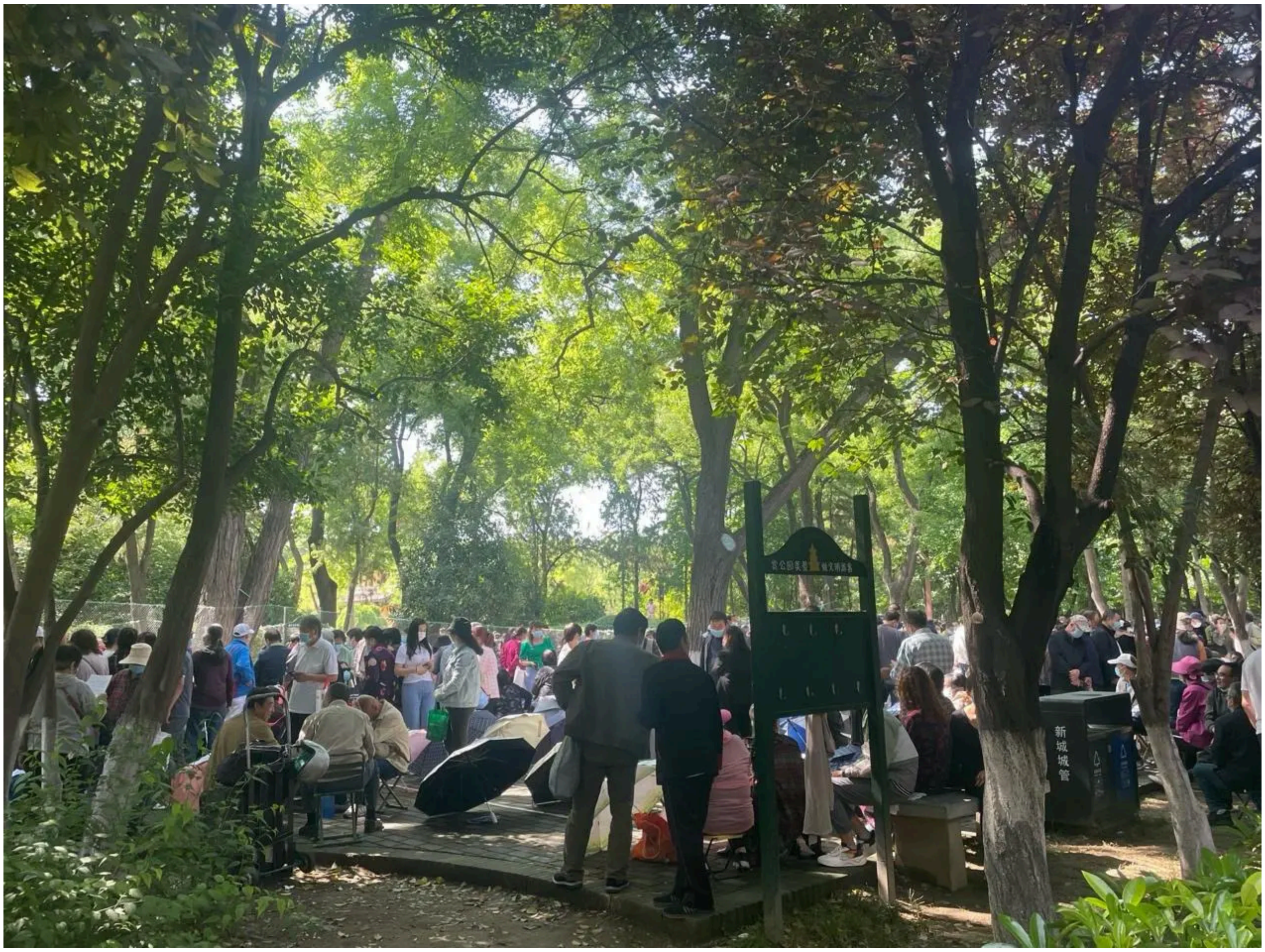
It is important to reflect that "we are implicated in the representational practices of those we study. We are engaged or complicit, as the case may be, in complex ways, with all those communities for whom media are important."[49]

During the research, Ziyin constructed personal profiles with her personal portraits, and information (including education, location, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) while participating in observation of MDAs and other online activities. Meanwhile, she interacted offline with matchmakers, clients, and spaces in the park. Despite the author's statement of the purpose of the research to the matchmakers with whom she interacted daily, her personality or other characteristics could have possibly affected some interactions, especially when some of the online users or offline clients had a definite preconceived purpose for the space and acted on their own goals. This paper cannot avoid these possible problems in embodied interactions but can only show the actual situation in as much detail as possible and give analyses. The authors believe that the collected empirical material gives crucial insight into the complex dynamics of the cultural practice of matchmaking in the age of platformization.

The Traditional Matchmaking in Urban China

Matchmaking Corner in Xi’an Revolution Park

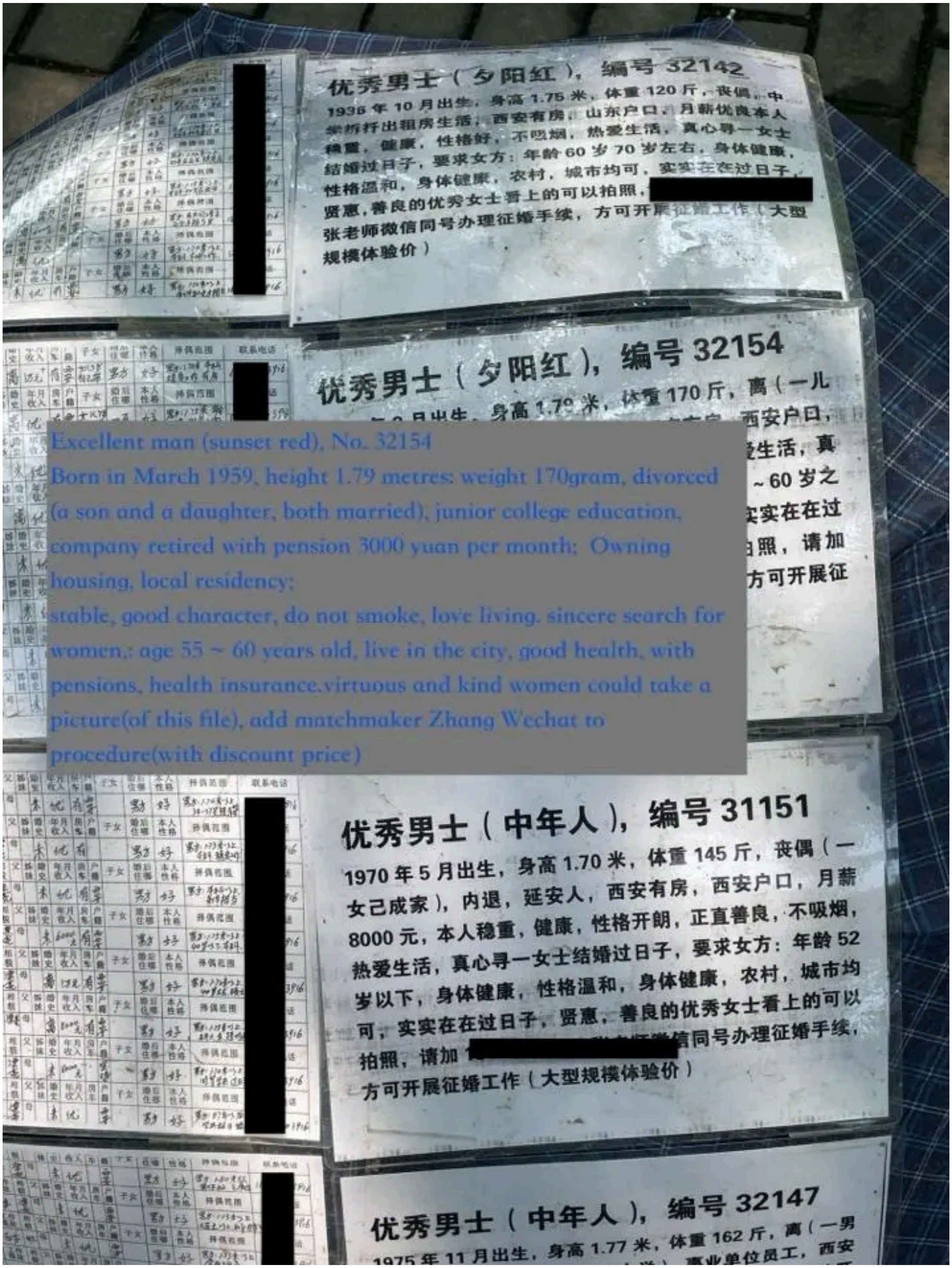
In Xi’an Revolution Park, a Chinese matchmaking corner, several big matchmaking companies and organizations are set, surrounded by individual matchmakers. Matchmakers are often middle-aged local women, and a few are men. They often display their clients’ information on boards or papers to attract more clients (see Fig 1). The boards, other display tools, matchmakers and potential clients collectively form the epitome of the traditional matchmaking market and its industry character. As a market, everyone who walks close to the area will be identified as a potential candidate who is looking for a partner, and will be invited to “free registration” (see in next subsection). The matchmaking services are always well-designed and categorized, with prices set accordingly. As a matchmaking staff (they always call themselves “teachers” in Chinese), “teacher Ho” offered every client a paid, customized membership for one year at their company. For instance, she explained, “the higher the education level, the higher the membership fee. 2980(CNY) for master (for a year), 3980 for doctor. Highly educated people also have high requirements, and it’s hard to find (someone for them). Especially girls generally want to find someone with a higher status than their own. (If one is) in the tip of the tower, the expensive fee (they need to pay).” Following the traditional Chinese valuation of women based on their fertility, increases in age and education raise the cost of matchmaking for them.[50]



< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/image.jpeg>

Figure 1. The Matchmaking Corner in Xi’an Revolution Park.

Then, the service starts by helping and coaching clients to fill out the forms the matchmakers designed, with some flaws deliberately skimmed over or downplayed and some of the numbers embellished (see Figs. 2 and 3). For instance, for young men, their assets, housing situation, profession, and salary must be highlighted if it is decent. For older males, real estate, household accounts, pensions, insurance, major illnesses, etc., need to be stated, and women are generally required to have a stable job, with a preference for caring jobs as nurses and teachers, and to be thrifty and family-oriented.



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岁以下，身体健康，性格温和，身体健康，农村，城市均
可，实实在在过日子，贤惠，善良的优秀女士看上的可以
拍照，请加 [redacted]信同号办理征婚手续，
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事业单位员工，西安

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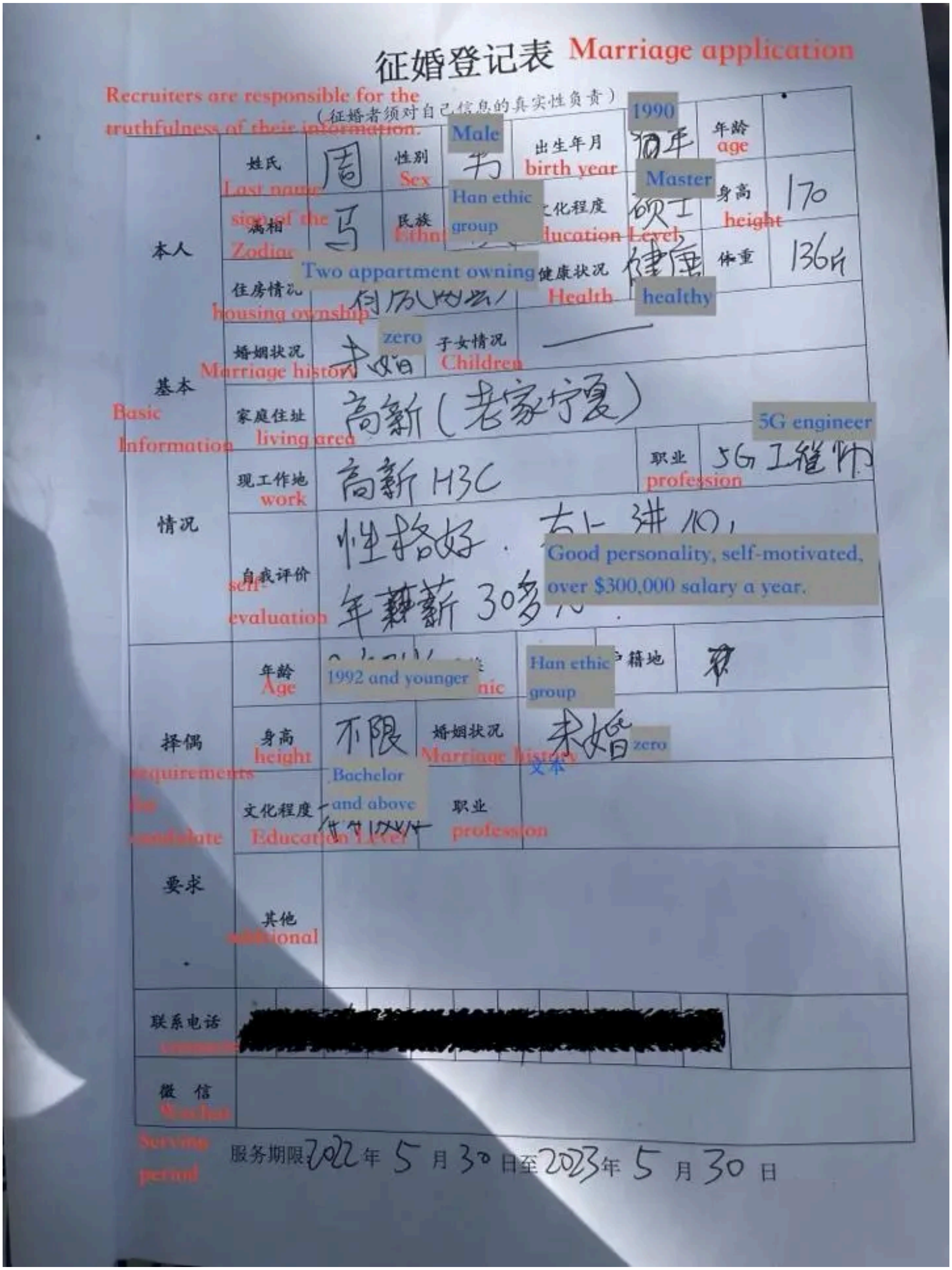

征婚登记表 Marriage application

（征婚者须对自己信息的真实性负责）
Recruiters are responsible for the truthfulness of their information.

本人	姓氏 Last name	周	性别 Sex	男 Male	出生年月 birth year	90年 1990	年龄 age	
	属相 sign of the Zodiac	马	民族 Ethnic	Han ethic group	文化程度 Education Level	硕士 Master	身高 height	170
	住房情况 housing ownship	有房(两套) Two appartment owning			健康状况 Health	健康 healthy	体重	136斤
基本 Basic Information	婚姻状况 Marriage history	未婚 zero	子女情况 Children	—				
	家庭住址 living area	高新（老家宁夏）						
情况	现工作地 work	高新 H3C			职业 profession	5G工程师 5G engineer		
	自我评价 self-evaluation	性格好．有上进心，年薪 30多万． Good personality, self-motivated, over $300,000 salary a year.						
择偶 requirements for candidate	年龄 Age	1992 and younger	民族 Ethnic	Han ethic group	户籍地	不		
	身高 height	不限	婚姻状况 Marriage history	未婚 zero 文本				
	文化程度 Education Level	本科以上 Bachelor and above	职业 profession					
要求	其他 additional							
联系电话 contact	[redacted]							
微信 Wechat								

Serving period 服务期限2022年5月30日至2023年5月30日

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/image-1.jpeg>

Figures 2 and 3. Different matchmaking forms.

After gathering a lot of forms, the form for male candidates will be given to the female clients first by the matchmakers. If one female client is interested in some of them, her file will also be given back to the male candidates. When the male candidate (also a client) positively responds, the matchmakers will arrange the one-on-one meeting at the matchmakers' office for them. This process may take place several times for one client to create a match. These meetings continue even if both sides are already interested. This work consumes the time and energy of matchmakers for them to find and connect both sides. Also, matchmakers provide relationship counseling, "offer[ing] emotional support, reassurance or dating tips."[51] Such support often falls in between the formal matchmaking service and an informal act of sympathy, especially when the client has an underprivileged status in local society.[52] Matchmaker "Teacher Wang" created more than ten groupings for matchmaking based on different types of clients. Her fliers note that one group consists of "collections of low-education, mentally disabled, and families who want the son-in-law (to take the family name of the female), applicable to urban men with lower education, rural men who can't afford to buy a residential property in the city."

In Between Online and Offline: Platformization in the Matchmaking Park

The traditional service of matchmaking is to match a client with one potential candidate at a time,[53] but now, the logic of matchmaking has evolved, which may indicate how matchmaking is now shaken by technological developments and digitalization.

All the matchmakers in Xi'an Revolution Park, the ones working for big companies as well as individual matchmakers, aim to create the impression of having a large client base (see Fig. 4). They sell potential clients the idea that the more clients they have, the bigger the possibilities are to make a match, and ultimately saving clients' time by meeting several candidates at once.

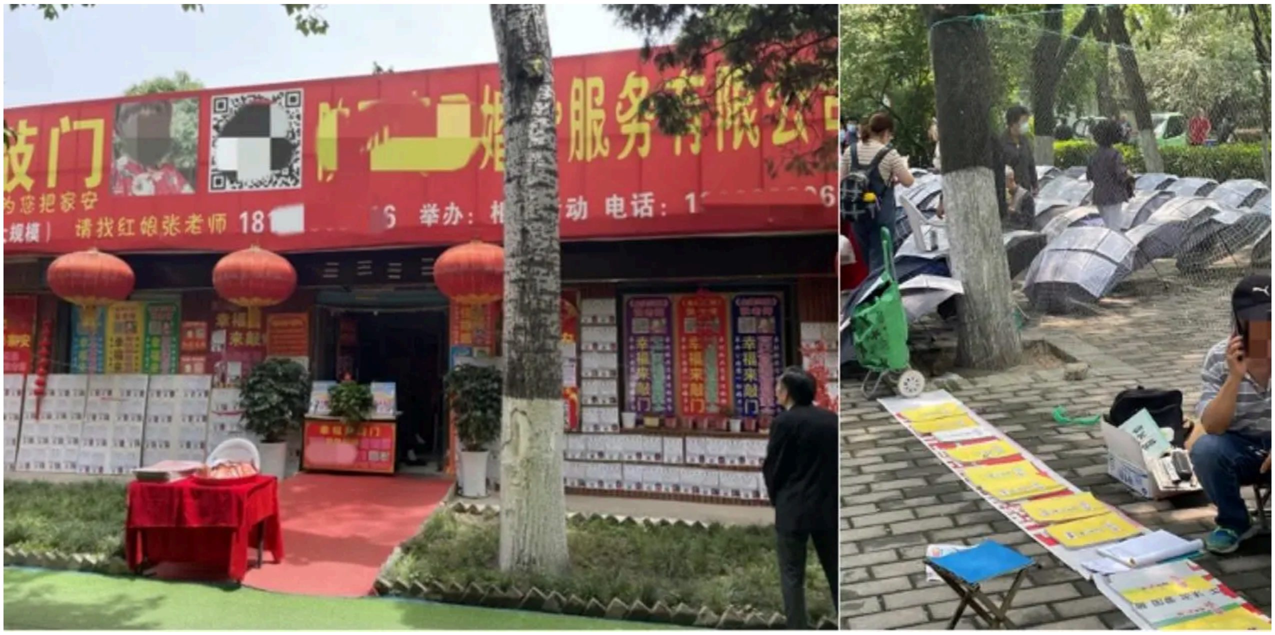

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Figure 4. The matchmakers' exhibits.

Each matchmaker put in the effort to gather as much "data" as possible. To do so, and to better operate between clients, the matchmakers shifted the work online, mostly to WeChat.

To collect data, some matchmakers strategically invite everyone to "free registration" by filling out the form (some on paper, some in their WeChat groups), which means the client could leave his or her information like occupation, living status, height, housing, contacts, their ideal types of candidates, etc., to the matchmaker, and the matchmaker will send these to the WeChat group or show it in the WeChat moments (the content can be showed to every WeChat friend one has), suggesting "someone would contact you if one's interested." Having all this data as a resource, matchmakers market their services by showing the data amount one has in WeChat groups to potential buyers. One matchmaker, “Teacher Zhou,” is proficient in the use of technical tools among these middle-aged matchmakers. She named her WeChat moments “Matchmaking Supermarket,” in which she posted the profiles of all her clients, numbered and coded, according to male, female, and older people, respectively, with different styles of pictures, as a label. Once potential clients give their personal information to her, she shows them the “matchmaking supermarket” for a free period as bait. But later, she will use a function on WeChat to make it invisible, if they end up deciding not to pay extra to become real clients. She interacts with all of her clients in WeChat, navigating often hundreds of operations a day.

Matchmakers also accumulate more data for their own databases through co-operation or purchase. Reusing data is commonplace, and matchmakers do not discard data even if it has been displayed by other matchmakers. Individual matchmakers work together to get more “free registrations” data and share a database (e.g., sharing several WeChat groups). At the same time, matchmaking companies that mainly provide traditional matchmaking services buy data from small matchmaking companies or individual matchmakers. The traditional service always offers tailor-made matchmaking services at a higher price, but it also needs “new data” to provide. As a result, they buy data from “collector” matchmakers and then charge their own clients an annual fee and an extra fee if the match is successful.

As a result of these practices, clients have little control over their data. People leave their information in the “free registration” database, and from then on, their data is out of their hands. Their data have been sent to WeChat groups that they’re not part of or left on paper that hardly ever is updated. Matchmakers state the data would only be kept for a year, but it is typically kept for much longer.[54] And the data is often sold to other matchmakers or matchmaking companies without telling clients either in advance or after the fact. Some matchmakers promote a 100CNY service for gaining partial control: clients can be added to their WeChat groups, where they can have agency to send their information and check other people’s messages at any time. But they still won’t know how matchmakers handle their data, like collecting or reselling.

As outlined above, matchmakers keep a traditional business model in place—a culturally-specific and customized service, to compete with the MDAs that impact their business. But they also combine the new data-driven mechanisms—collecting and selling the data for the 100CNY service or offering client data to other matchmaking agents. Some matchmakers, the “collectors,” even turn to rely on the client data as their main source of income, as they operate WeChat groups with four hundred to five hundred people, managing a relatively large database that a regional matchmaking market could hardly operate without digital media.

“The emergence of platforms as a replacement for pre-existing modes of economic coordination” is fundamental to both the idea of platformization and the digital platforms themselves.[55] Here, just as the “matchmaking supermarket” of “Teacher Zhou” indicates, data collection is thus driven by the perpetual cycle of capital accumulation, in which the data is collected and sold by capital owners.[56]

Where Does Matchmaking Labor Go in MDAs?

MDAs represent the character of datafication and platformization, with the commoditization of data being their main features.[57] But how do they differ from the traditional matchmakers who leverage crucial elements of datafication and platformization as part of their services?

In light of the “production-consumption continuum” or “prosumer” theoretical discussion in plantform usage, we consider not only questions of agency related to users and MDAs, but also questions of digital labor.[58] Now, “how data is extracted from multitudes of users in the form of 'digital labor'" and "how users' behavior is fragmented and reduced to standard tasks" should be examined.[59]

Labor in Data Files and Data Activities

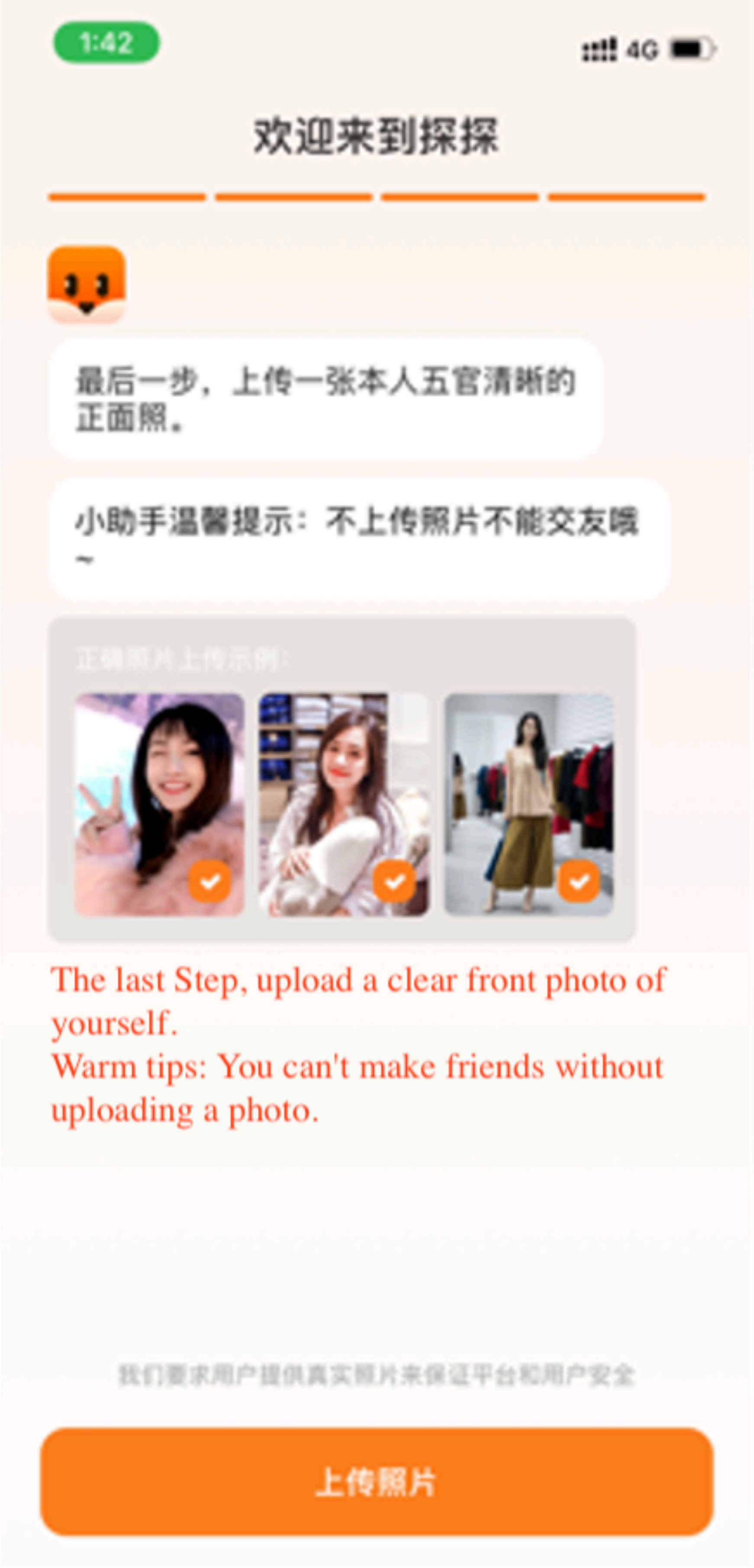
To recap the first section, traditional matchmakers are responsible for 1) Information gathering, information imparting; 2) Assistance in data building, embellishing information; 3) Candidates matching, arranging of meetings; and 4) Process tracking, relationship counseling. Most of these processes need to be accomplished in MDAs as well. Some of the work is taken on by computing technology and interactive interfaces, but not all of it.

First, as part of the information-gathering process, users need to register themselves, leaving a lot of data on the MDA by creating an account. Prospective users can sign up through a variety of ways when the MDAs follow the same strategy as the traditional matchmakers in the previous section, which is to use "free sign-ups" to grow the pool of users. Just through users' signing up as an account for the platform, the growing pool can then be used to attract other users and solicit business. The datafile creation provides a major selling point that the platforms can monetize, rather than just serve the users themselves.

Also, active users generate the capital value of DAU (daily active user). The number of DAU usually counts the number of users who logged in or used the app (excluding repeat logins) within one day. The higher DAU implies more possible user spending within the app, such as purchasing memberships, the "who liked me" feature, etc. More importantly, DAU influences the price when the platform resells user data. The DAU, or MAU (monthly active user), have become the main metric for measuring apps in the internet world.[60] For instance, Soul states in its official Baidu encyclopedia, "According to Avery Dennison, Soul has the highest number of private messages per user per day and the highest number of daily launches per device in 2021," and "according to Soul App's disclosed data for

March 2021, Soul App has one of the highest average daily DAU launches in the industry in its category, as well as one of the highest average daily launch rates and Gen Z user penetration."[61] This slightly differs from the traditional matchmakers, who seem to sell the data by pieces but not to value the activeness and updatability of each user. This difference may relate to the different operating speeds between the online and offline worlds.

Moreover, the uploading of photographs has become a mandatory step of information gathering. Portrait photos are almost always the most important piece of user data for MDAs. Similar to traditional matchmakers asking for personal information and photos, MDAs ask users to make their accounts available through the use of real photos and activities to attract and retain other users and to improve the matchmaking experience. The MDA TanTan asks new users to upload portrait photos that must show their faces clearly for detection and states "No photos, no matchmaking" (see Fig. 5). Some MDAs encourage users to upload more photos. For instance Tinder has a feature it calls "Featured Photos," that claims to automatically "keep testing all of your profile photos, picking and prioritizing the best ones."[62]



最后一步，上传一张本人五官清晰的正面照。

小助手温馨提示：不上传照片不能交友哦~

正确照片上传示例：

我们要求用户提供真实照片来保证平台和用户安全

The last Step, upload a clear front photo of yourself.
Warm tips: You can't make friends without uploading a photo.

≤

https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/image.png>

Figure 5. The facial photo request in MDA TanTan.

This should be thought about in connection with two MDA's characteristics. First, the swipe is one of their most important interaction features, which interaction relies heavily on the user's photo data, and a sufficiently large amount of photo data. Second, underneath the swiping, another significant characteristic of MDAs is the algorithmic matching. The algorithm continuously feeds user A to user B or A to C. The algorithm, as a means of invoking data, requires fresh new users and their activities to train the algorithm for future pairing.[63]

Then, users also need to tag themselves, fill in self-introductions, and connect their other social media accounts. As an MDA with a relatively wide user base and a long history of operation, Tinder is equipped with a fairly well-developed tagging mechanism. After registering for an account, Tinder first asks the user to fill out a five-hundred-word profile. The user can choose interest tags, and there are nearly a hundred interest tags available. They need to choose up to five tags and cannot create their own tags. After this, the user can fill in twenty-five pieces of information such as horoscope, education, family plan, COVID-19 vaccine status, etc. Each piece of information contains five to twenty labeling options. Users are not required to fill out all of this information, but Tinder (as well as other MDAs) reminds users of the current level of completeness of their information (30 percent to 100 percent), and guides users to improve their information. The MDA Jimu claims "the more complete the profile is, the higher the match rate, and the better the socialization" and the "perfect match."[64] According to the settings of the platform, user-selected tags serve as the computational foundation for matching algorithms to pair users and for conducting routine data analysis.

For the matching, there are two general modes, “real-time” and “non-real-time.” Most MDAs have “non-real-time” matching, i.e., when user A sees user B’s profile, A can choose to “swipe left” (not interested) or “swipe right” (like). After A swipes right, if user B has already swiped right on user A, both users will be in a “match”, and they can enter the chat interface. However, if user B has not randomly been fed by user A’s profile, or didn’t “like” user A, B will receive the system’s “someone has liked you” message, and then can interact accordingly. In “real-time” matching, that two users are online at the same time is the main condition for matching, while other tags are prioritized backward. Taking Soul as an example, its main interface shows the number of users who are currently online, and once a user clicks on the “Soul Match” function, two current online users would be matched together. Again, these computations rely on the user’s swipes or online time/activities to perform similarly, combinatorial computations to keep the algorithm function. These users’ actions of tagging themselves, and every swipe and click, are the laborious process of training algorithms, profiting the MDAs.

Aesthetic Labor Practices

As mentioned previously, matchmakers of traditional dating markets edit the presentation of their client’s information with knowledge situated in a socio-cultural context to enhance the matching rate. For example, in traditional Chinese matchmaking culture, men and women are assessed for their value in different ways and are taught to act accordingly.[65] In the case of MDAs, however, users rely on themselves, to fit in the cultural environment and find the clue to increase their chances of a match. Researchers understand the flexible interaction of users around algorithmic data through the lens of technological domestication,[66] but from another perspective, this process may suggest that users perform aesthetic labor for the platform.

Aesthetic labor, from a sociological perspective, refers to “the transformation of embodied abilities and attribute traits by workers into skills that are aesthetically adapted and incorporated into the labor process to evoke sensory emotions in customers for the commercial benefit of the organization."[67] It emphasizes work for which "individuals are compensated indirectly or directly for the appearance and affective power of their own bodies" —as opposed to bodywork (unpaid work on one's own body) and body labor (paid work based on the bodies of others)[68] or emotional labor, which has been theoretically described first by sociologist Arlie Hochschild as the unpaid labor of managing emotions.[69]

MDAs lead users to mistakenly believe that every photo uploaded and every edited self-introduction is an autonomous action, ones that can serve as opportunities to improve their attractiveness.[70] The commercial benefits gained by the platform in the process are easily neglected. This type of labor is closely related to the cultural endogeneity on which the platform relies, and contributes to shaping the platform's aesthetics. The user's body and facial image, expression, and overall looks and style can be converted into commercial value for the platform. Simply put, platforms need users to "look good and sound good."[71]

Interviewee28, recruited from Douban comment, illuminates how platforms invisibly convert the aesthetic labor of their users, especially female users, for the benefit of the platform:

> Girls in [city G] are more detailed (refined), and not as rough, they know how to dress themselves, how to look better on their own, and express themselves. I met three girls on the app while I was in [city G]. They were really good-looking and very attractive to me. I only used the app for two weeks in [city G], but the user experience was different from using it in [city X], it has something to do with the city. I just like the girl's picture too much, I really want to chat with her, I really do. I feel like I can't miss it. So, I will go to top-up the membership, or buy the "super like." I think it's worth it because I had the feeling rush into my head, just have to make that match.

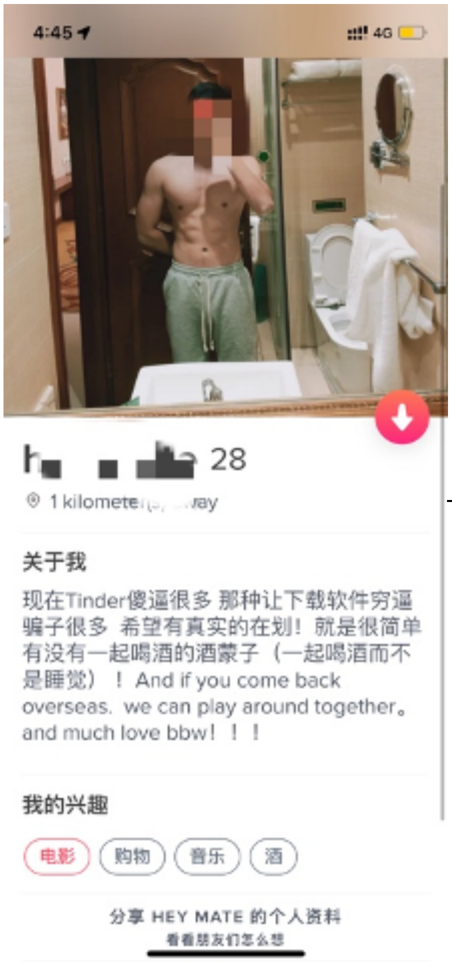
Interviewee28's review of the MDA users among cities also suggests that aesthetics is an ambiguous and flexible criterion. Consequently, MDA users must deeply analyze cultural contexts to discern what constitutes “aesthetically desirable” in a given time and place. They may need to follow specific fashion trends, pursue upper-class aesthetics, or emphasize innovation and authenticity, etc.. Matching on MDAs is quickly assessed; it’s largely based on geographic proximity and physical attractiveness. So, users need to display effective visual attraction features and textual content for viewers to make quick decisions. In different (sub)cultural environments, such as different times, spaces, or even different applications, users need to put in the effort to learn the current cultural environment and make some kind of change.

Interviewee6 mentioned that she uploads different photos and uses different introductions on different dating apps. For example, a dating app that aims for “serious relationships” encourages users to first fill in their education and work information, and provides a channel to authenticate their real name and education through their ID number. She will post some pictures of, in her words, “good marriage material,” while on other platforms, it is beneficial to adapt a more “Western style,” to “show more skin” “be more casual” (to fit in the “plastic sexuality culture”) because everyone in it is doing so.

Aesthetic changes may also be associated with physical spaces. For instance, some culturally-based criteria are externalized and embedded again in the self-presentation of

MDAs. Many male MDAs users in China, especially users of TanTan and Momo, prefer to present their wealth as a manifestation of masculinity, for example using cars, watches, luxury goods, and upwardly mobile activities as eye-catching decorations in their photos, while men in Western societies define masculinity as avoiding femininity while displaying sexuality, assertiveness, and dominance.[72] Accordingly, male MDA users in the West idealize male behavior and appearance through rugged masculinity, emphasizing their body and physical, even militaristic, capacity. In this way, cultural preferences also influence aesthetics, with people in different societies choosing to use different cultural activities to express themselves, such as animal protection, environmental protection, volunteering, music festivals, art exhibitions, political events, and so on.

Living between distinct aesthetic traditions, those users who live abroad or in changing online/offline environments, often choose to integrate more into the local intercultural environment, by changing the way they present and express themselves, and even how they engage in sexual activities. The conditions for crossing these cultural thresholds are not as difficult as leaping to a different social class, yet it takes time and effort to figure out and find these flexible and ever-changing cultural norms to become fluent in one of the cultures (see Fig. 6).



[redacted] 28

1 kilometer(s) away

关于我

现在Tinder傻逼很多 那种让下载软件穷逼骗子很多 希望有真实的在划！就是很简单 有没有一起喝酒的酒蒙子（一起喝酒而不是睡觉）！ And if you come back overseas. we can play around together。and much love bbw！！！

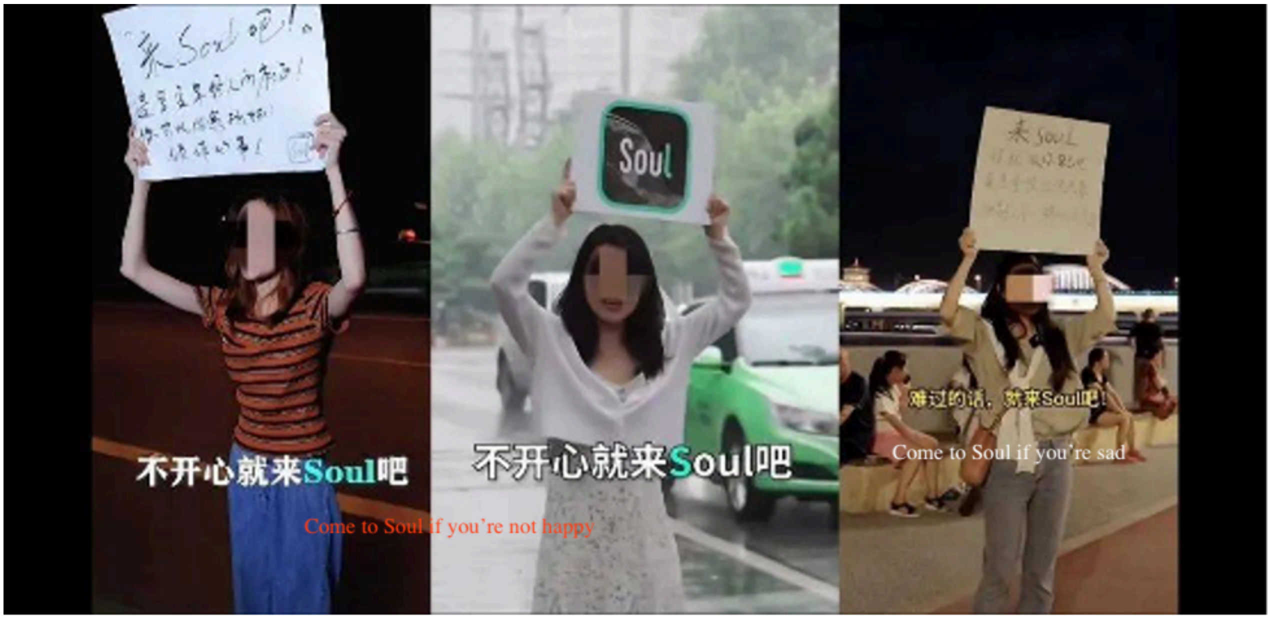
我的兴趣

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/image-1.png>

Figure 6. User in between cultures.

Users do or may need to do certain work if they want to fit in certain cultural environments and look for matches. Demonstrating changes in cultural thought concerning feminism and the proactive sexual desire of women, in MDAs that are dominated by users mostly from Western societies where feminism is a well-promoted discursive climate, such as Tinder, Hinge, and Bumble, promote themselves to be "female-friendly"[73] not only by their UX design and emergency functions, but also by several events that have been held to solidify the feminist environment.[74] A lot of female users label themselves as feminists in such apps, and so do some male users; they also tag themselves as feminists and talk about feminism in their self-introductions. This phenomenon among men users has been widely discussed.[75]

Whereas, conversely, among participants who predominantly use traditional ways of matchmaking, or in environments where conservative social trends have emerged under the influence of mainstream cultural and political forces, MDAs primarily serve conservative cultures.. For instance, topics that are considered radical are rarely brought up, or are suppressed in some Chinese MDAs. With internet censorship, male users shouldn't send outlier sexual expressions (Interviewee1), while female users are not only restricted by censorship, but according to the traditional gender scripts, they are required to hide their sexual desires and follow the male. A more specific demonstration is that female users take pictures from a downward shooting angle to appear more passive, gentle, or soft or act more docile and innocent.[76] In addition, the advertisements of Chinese MDA Soul show how the aesthetic labor of women could serve or attract male users (see Fig. 7).[77] This work fuels the guiding logics of the MDAs and helps the MDAs operate under and be consistent with mainstream values of masculinity and Confucianism. Along the social norms, users need to hide their potential non-heterosexual orientation[78] and submit to the opposition to casual sex or "radical" feminism.[79]


来Soul吧！
不开心就来Soul吧
Come to Soul if you're not happy
Soul
不开心就来Soul吧
来Soul
难过的话，就来Soul吧！
Come to Soul if you're sad

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/image-2.png>

Figure 7. The official operating advertisement of MDA Soul.

A New Matchmaking Labor

In response to the longstanding need for matchmaking, MDAs surfaced as the platformized answer to matchmaking in the digital age. As a type of digital platform or even a representative of an algorithmic matching platform, MDAs brought about quantitative and qualitative changes to the practice of matchmaking. This paper begins with the tradition of matchmaking to then discuss the platformization of the traditional matchmaking market that takes place in light of the emergence of platforms. The shift between traditional and modern matchmaking that leads us to propose an analysis of digital platforms of matchmaking in the following.

With respect to the idea of digital labor, platformization and datafication are always combined and have several features: 1) "The supposed universality of data reframes everything as falling under the domain of data capitalism. All spaces must be subjected to datafication."[80] 2) Data and data activities as capital and material for training algorithmic arithmetic, are required to be initiative and autonomous, which means users need to “work.” In matchmaking, people pursue the so-called infinite opportunities that big data brings—an idea that platformization and datafication inculcate. Thus, even in the platformization shift of traditional matchmaking, we find that matchmakers bring this idea into their work, i.e., the specialized (exclusive) serviceability of traditional matchmaking is gradually replaced by the notion of big data. When this happens, perhaps the agency moves to users. For example, contemporary traditional matchmakers begin to ask users to make matches on their own in the chat groups of SNS tools (Social Networking Services, such as Wechat, Tencent QQ, etc.) by sending messages and other actions. In these cases, agency is given to users at the cost of labor involved in maintaining and updating their profiles.

MDAs arguably amplify this tendency by setting up a seemingly neutral position to match, with tagging and algorithmic matching relying on users′ data uploads and actions. The production of data and data activity is unpaid digital labor whose characteristics are identical to other social platforms in terms of the platform-based nature of the MDA. Furthermore, we point to another layer of labor which is part of the users′ involvement in platformized intimacy. Whereas MDAs seemingly function as digital matchmakers, part of the work of the matchmaker is transferred to the user as a prosumer. This part of the transferred immaterial intimate labor shows up as aesthetic labor in the production-consumption continuum, and they are strongly culturally embedded. Aesthetic labor, for example, is not gratuitous in pre-existing traditional matchmaking. But in MDAs, the platforms profits from the aesthetic value of the laborers beyond the data, converting their cultural aesthetics and affect into commodities for the platform’s profit, creating a composite exploitative relationship. In this relationship, the users′ labor is continuously required to update and refine their self-presentation in the digital cultural environment in which they are situated.

Combining these two layers of labor, we attempt to propose the concept of the platformized matchmaking labor. As we pointed out, the original matchmaking labor is to arrange matches between intimate and romantic partners, and also to secure courtships and other interpersonal arrangements.[81] This is the work primarily undertaken by matchmakers. The matchmaking labor we describe adds additional layers of labor in the age of digital platformization. That is, while the matching arrangement is based on algorithmic counting, the user is required to perform a variety of digital activities to complete the new process of matchmaking, including data authorization, data activation, sensing the cultural context, adapting the digital self-presentation, initiating matches, and so on, a part of which is transformed by the platform (or platformization) into the revenue-generating commodities of matchmaking, and for which the user does not receive compensation.

We thus also propose the platformized matchmaking labor to make the claim that further research is needed to account for the impact of platformization on socio-cultural practices, such as is the case with traditional matchmaking. Platformized matchmaking labor represents a new type of labor in the process of matchmaking in the digital era. We believe that, in the modern platformization in China and potentially other places, this concept is not limited to the practice on digital platforms, but opens to other labor sites, just like the traditional matchmaking practice that has been platformized. Secondly, platformized matchmaking labor needs to be leveraged in more contexts and sites beyond urban China. Matchmaking can have multiple meanings. It not only points to the matching of intimate relationships but also to other forms of relationship building, such as for business, human resources and communities. These types of matchmaking may equally present new labor in the digital age. Lastly, in this article, through the juxtaposition of traditional and modern matchmaking with the analysis of the empirical data, we come to outline two categories of labor present in the new matchmaking labor. The concept of platformized matchmaking labor has the potential to encompass many other kinds of labor involved in matchmaking practices, such as (digital) emotional labor and other work that is related to the intimate labor that is done by traditional matchmakers but seems hard to pinpoint in MDAs. In conclusion, as this article aimed to show, research on the platformization of labor and intimacy would benefit greatly from the analysis of the in-between spaces of offline and online that we surfaced for the case of matchmaking.

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“Help Them Keep Doing What They’re Doing”: Intersections of Agency, Affect, and Capital in the Twitch Subscription System

by Kelsey Cummings | Digital Platforms and Agency, Issue 14.2 (Fall 2025)

ABSTRACT With live streaming capabilities becoming increasingly important to the success of social media applications and representing central modes of engagement for popular digital platforms, the economic and socio-political functions of live streaming are critical to an understanding of changing new media landscapes. The existing scholarship on Twitch and similar live streaming platforms has demonstrated the importance of both financial investments and affective labor to these digital spaces. Building from existing scholarship, this article will apply a critical-cultural lens to analyze the ways in which Twitch’s interface mediates users’ agency through mechanics centered on affect, capital, and their intersections. How do emotional intimacies manifest across the design of the Twitch subscription system? How does Twitch incentivize live streaming subscriptions for both viewers and creators via design choices? What does this mean for an understanding of the affective investments that users have in live streaming more broadly speaking? Through an examination of the design-based affordances of live streaming on Twitch, I ask how these capabilities (to pay streamers via subscriptions and gift systems as well as to follow, comment, and otherwise engage) reflect the varying ways that intimacy is both created and understood in live streaming contexts. This work will contribute to an understanding of the affective investments that users have, express, and create across various new media platforms. It will particularly focus on how affective labor is both compensated and obfuscated via systems like the Twitch subscription.

KEYWORDS Twitch, affect, digital labor, live streaming

While video game live streaming platform Twitch was already enormously successful prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, its popularity boomed even more when users began to quarantine in 2020.[1] The existing scholarship on Twitch and similar live streaming platforms has demonstrated the importance of both financial investments[2] and affective labor[3] to these digital spaces. The body of research on Twitch has applied quantitative and qualitative methods and a diverse series of frameworks including uses and gratifications and parasocial interaction to examine how users are motivated to produce and consume live streaming content.[4] Building from existing scholarship, this article applies a critical-cultural lens to argue that Twitch's interface mediates users' agency through mechanics centered on affect, capital, and their intersections. In doing so, it brings the existing literature on Twitch's financial and affective exchanges in conversation with each other. Neoliberal promises of choice as an expression of agency manifest in digital contexts as a way to appease users and assure them of their autonomy despite platform dominance. This function is particularly apparent in the relationships between Twitch streamers and their subscribers, with the contradictory nature of parasocial love on viewers' end and capitalization on streamers' end highlighting how the behaviors of users of all kinds are manipulated to maximize Twitch's own profits. Despite this platform bias, I conclude that it is still possible for users to counter the platform's affordances in politically subversive ways. In short, agency on Twitch manifests not just as an illusion built by and into the platform itself, but also in the form of potential oppositional practices implemented by users.

There are several design-based affordances of live streaming capital exchange on Twitch. The mechanics that this article will focus on include traditional subscriptions (both individually paid and provided as part of the Amazon Prime Gaming package), the tier system of subscribing, and the exchanging of one-month subscriptions as gifts among users. Through an examination of the design-based affordances of live streaming on Twitch, I ask how these capabilities (to pay streamers via subscriptions and gift systems as well as to follow, comment, and otherwise engage) reflect the varying ways that intimacy is both created and understood in live streaming contexts. This work will contribute to an understanding of the affective investments that users have, express, and create across various new media platforms. It will particularly focus on how user agency is offered and denied via systems like the Twitch subscription.

Technical features that emphasize the need for affective labor as a vehicle for the creation of good feelings among viewers are notable in contrast to and simultaneous coexistence with the harsh nature of some of the communication that happens on Twitch. Much scholarship has noted and discussed the role that harassment, trolling, and other negative exchanges have in interactions among Twitch streamers and viewers.[5] Despite this, the ongoing growth and subsequent mainstreaming of the platform has had the potential to diversify not only the types of streaming that it features (which now include and encourage a variety of non-gaming activities like streamers playing instruments, creating costumes, working alongside viewers during study- or write-ins, and "just chatting"), but also the variety of audiences brought in. This mainstreaming can be both for better and for worse and has the potential to both facilitate or attempt to circumscribe phenomena like platform harassment.[6]

Emotional intimacies manifest across the designs of live streaming platforms through linguistic and image-based expressions of affection. Platforms incentivize live streaming for both viewers and creators via design choices that emphasize both autonomy and expressions of affection. This means that users' affective investments in live streaming are inherently tied up in financial transactions like the Twitch Bit.[7] Monetary transactions on platforms like Twitch (particularly, in Twitch's case, the subscription system) are designed to be affective in the sense that they combine both embodied experiences and interior feelings to produce a sense of connected intimacy between viewers and streamers. This article's analysis of Twitch subscriptions therefore contributes to ongoing research by putting the Twitch literature on financial investments and affective investments in conversation with each other, with my own contribution demonstrating how agential readings of Twitch must be informed by an understanding of the platform's intentionally limiting nature.

Affect and Affective Labor in Streaming

Conceiving of affect as the intersection of physical and psychological feeling on a collective level, this concept is a useful framework for understanding Twitch as a cultural phenomenon. The embodied nature of intimacy on Twitch is established both by the effect that streamers have or are assumed to have on viewers' bodies in the form of elements like physical attraction (see, for example, use of the derogatory term "titty streamers"[8]) and, less commonly but notably, by the effect that viewers can have on streamers' bodies. The latter can sometimes manifest more literally, as for example when streamers do things (at the sometime-request of viewers) like getting haircuts or tattoos live, often as challenges for or in celebration of reaching particular milestones on Twitch.[9]

Parasocial relationships are encouraged by Twitch not just through its more routine elements (like platform language that encourages intimacy, as discussed in more detail below), but also through features like TwitchCon Meet and Greets, advertised on the Twitch site with a picture of a fan posing with three streamers: "Come say hey, grab a pic, and get your merch signed by your favorite streamers!"[10] By evoking fan convention meet and greets where audiences can take photos with film and television stars, the TwitchCon promotion both recognizes the emotional investment and intimacy that characterizes real or perceived relationships between streamers and viewers and also seems to acknowledge the distanced nature of such relationships when streamers become so popular that they no longer evoke the casualness with which Twitch is more commonly associated. The parasociality that Twitch encourages in its viewers' relations to streamers demonstrates the inherently limited nature of agency on the platform—it is impossible for viewers to achieve the level of intimacy they might want with streamers, just as it is arguably impossible for streamers to achieve the level of financial success they might want from the platform.

There is a tension between streamer as celebrity (indicated by the meet and greet promotion) and streamer as friend (arguably indicated by most other Twitch features). Ultimately, the distinction is primarily just the difference between very popular Twitch streamers and average Twitch streamers. As scholarship notes, Twitch is mostly known for and associated with its intimate, communal nature.[11] Channels like the enormously popular @CriticalRole are the exception to the rule, as so many tens of thousands of viewers tune in for those live streams that it would be virtually impossible to even follow the chat, much less contribute to an ongoing conversation in it as one might in a standard stream with much fewer participants (subsequently, larger streams are also associated with viewers providing less financial contribution to the streaming channel[12]). This comparative distance hardly matters to the larger live stream's broader sociality, though, as a sense of community is still evoked by watching the channel live with one's (tens of thousands of) fellow viewers, much like watching a new blockbuster film in a packed theater filled with excited fans or, as T. L. Taylor notes, like watching a live television broadcast in the vein of *Saturday Night Live*.[13]

All of these elements of the affective nature of Twitch reflect the important roles that both emotional and physical investments play in the platform's successful functioning. One of the differences between having Twitch on in the background (e.g. while working or doing errands) and having television on in the background is that the Twitch stream is intentionally made to feel like listening to a friend or friends playing games and/or talking about their hobbies, their jobs, and their lives. This is why, for example, users can write the "!lurk" command in certain chats to indicate to streamers that they are "lurking" and listening despite not contributing to the chat. However, another difference between the mediums is that the economic structure of the Twitch stream only occasionally mirrors that of traditional broadcast television. While ads periodically run through Twitch streams for viewers who are not subscribed to the channel they are watching, viewers are also often encouraged to make other types of financial investment in their favorite streamers. These investments, whether in the form of subscriptions, “cheering” (tipping with “Bits,” which are Twitch currency), or other types of payment, provide certain social benefits to the viewer while providing capital benefits to the streamer. These features of the platform represent its central offer of agency for users, that of a digital financial model in which viewers can serve as patrons to creators they want to support and streamers can make money off of their streams.

The language of Twitch consistently implores users to shape their behavior around what benefits the streamers they follow and view, assuming the successful creation of the parasocial relationships that are encouraged by both the platform and its streamers. These evocations include: “Support every month and Subscribe to help [streamer] keep doing what they’re doing” (subscription benefits like access to special channel-specific emotes are identified as existing not because of the platform itself, but “As a thank you from [streamer]”), “Catch [streamer] right after this ad break; stick around to support the stream!”, and “Cheer [tip the streamer with Bits] to support [streamer].” While Twitch itself seems to be perceived by most viewers as relatively neutral in its encouragement of their capital investment, likely given the extreme extent to which any and all forms of monetizing have become naturalized in social media platforms, the etiquette that many viewers seem to expect of streamers is very different. Marginalized streamers in particular are sometimes subject to harassment (in the form, for example, of YouTube compilations of “greedy streamers”) if they complain or are perceived to be complaining about a lack of monetary compensation (i.e. they directly solicit subscriptions from their viewers outside of the platform’s more culturally normalized “sub-athons”). This ultimately results in most streamers enacting affective labor by performing humility and gratitude in order to please their viewers. They likely do so in part with the hopes of emulating successful users such as @broxh_, who went viral for trying to return a donation from a viewer near the height of Twitch's pandemic lockdown-driven surge in popularity.

A Twitch Ambassador as of 2023 (more on this in the next section), streamer @broxh_ is shown in YouTube versions of his viral 2020 live stream clip carving wood. A "sub train" begins, in which multiple viewers purchase and/or gift monthly subscriptions in short succession (Twitch refers to "hype trains," which include not just subscriptions but also other financial contributions like cheering with Bits, and the platform encourages this behavior with various "TwitchHypeTrain" emotes).[14] In the video, @broxh_ reacts to several audio notifications that indicate that a viewer has given gift subscriptions to some of the channel's audience members: "Wait, did someone gift some subs? Ah, bro, you didn't have to! Can I, um, give that money back? . . . Is there any way I can give the money back? Ah, you too . . . [laughs] Once again, I'm telling you, you don't have to sub, like, you don't have to. You can watch the stuff for free. Like, that's the best thing you can do. [laughs] Fuck, um, but please, hold on to your—oh, not a sub train emote. [laughs] Hold– can you, like– hold on to your money, we're in the midst of a lockdown. Use it on your family, not me. [laughs]"[15] The @ItsTwitch YouTube channel's version of this clip had over seven million views and 470 thousand likes as of March 2024. One of the video's top comments from user @hex720d7 has 6,300 likes and begins with the anecdote, "I've donated $50 to him and he returned it back."

@broxh_'s humility and generosity in returning or attempting to return the financial gifts he has received reflect two conflicting elements of Twitch culture. On the one hand, streamers are encouraged to view Twitch as a viable opportunity to become successful social media influencers, which makes @broxh_'s behavior counter to the platform's supposed function.[16] When viewers gleefully give him money, they do so without seeming to care about the fact that they are ostensibly disrespecting his wishes. Some top comments under the YouTube video, for example, include @paltimpotampkin7647's "'You don't need to sub' 'You can watch this thing for free' Community: I'm about to start this man's whole career" (which has 9.8 thousand likes) and @emojicheckerofvibes2837's "'Can I give the money back?' Viewers: So you have chosen 10,000$" (which has 3.8 thousand likes). Twitch as a platform encourages and naturalizes financial exchanges to such an extent that viewers do not care to, and even feel that it would be insufficient to, express their love for their favorite streamers in any way besides through payment to said streamer (regardless of whether or not the streamer actually wants their payment). Indeed, streamers' lack of autonomy is reflected in the fact that they have no way of maintaining their affiliate status while disabling subscriptions on their channel; as one Reddit user said in response to the question, "Is there a way to disable your subscription button?": "Subscriptions are how Twitch takes their cut[;] allowing affiliates to disable them would be against their interest."[17] On the other hand, @broxh_'s behavior and viewers' reactions to it can be seen as emblematic of the extent to which affective labor is so integral to Twitch as a platform that it is necessitated even when streamers are ostensibly using the platform in the service of having fun, enjoying their hobbies, and being social with viewers, rather than making money. In short, a person playing games or enjoying hobbies with their friends would not need to make a point of asking said friends not to pay them for doing so; and simultaneously, said friends would not ignore their request and "force" more money on them in response. In the context of Twitch, @broxh_'s behavior is seen not as reasonable or to be respected, but as a "wholesome" marker of the streamer's goodness and purity, marking him as deserving of even more financial support. Despite this intrinsically financial element, users are still expected to view and treat the platform as an inherently social and interpersonal outlet (common refrains about @broxh_ indicate that he renewed a given viewer's "faith in humanity"), rather than an outlet for financial exchanges.

While the @ItsTwitch example of a YouTube video that reposts @broxh_'s viral exchange recognizes it for its "wholesome" nature per the title ("wholesome twitch streamer BROXH tries to give money back"), other YouTube versions of the clip make a point to contrast @broxh_ as a "wholesome" streamer with "greedy" Twitch users. One such video, which also has over seven million views and 387 thousand likes as of March 2024, begins with the creator narrating, "When it comes to streamers, I feel like there's two different types."[18] The video later cuts to a clip of a young woman streamer (@BadBunny) loudly saying, "a whole speech about how I need subs to keep this stream going if you like the content, blah, blah, blah. How [does] that result in zero subs? There are regular [viewer]s here! *Five! Dollars! A month!* How do you have *hours* of time to watch me and not *five dollars*? I don't know—what are you *doing* with your *life*, where you have *hours* of time to watch Twitch and not *five dollars* to provide for the content that you're watching?" The video then contrasts this with @broxh_ trying to return his donations. Notably, the first clip of the "greedy" streamer is twenty-seven seconds long (and picks up with the streamer being mid-sentence) in contrast with @broxh_'s one minute and four second long clip, which includes a bit more context. The compilation video creator concludes the video by saying, "If you were to choose one, which would you be? Hopefully . . . you'll make the right choice."

While the abrasive nature of the "greedy" streamer's presentation was criticized by many and received some tabloid news coverage, her words themselves reflect to an exacting degree the contradictions and inequities inherent in Twitch monetization.[19] The meritocracy myth of Twitch, which mandates "grinding" in its would-be success stories,[20] also reflects broader cultures of social media, aspirational labor, and the myth of accidental entrepreneurship.[21] Ironically, the streamer's anger at having produced hours of content in exchange for which she has not received the payment she expected is pointed to by acolytes of social media economic systems as the reason for her failure. If only she were not so "greedy," the implication of this video is, she would be rewarded for her good behavior and “wholesomeness” with payment for her services, like @broxh_ was. Similar criticisms have been leveled at other streamers who complain about a lack of financial “support” from their viewers.[22] Notably, this often involves framing the streamer as having “asked” for money in the form of donations rather than in the form of income or payment for services rendered.

The pinned comment under the “Greedy Vs. Wholesome Twitch Streamer” video, which is from YouTube channel @Broxh and has been liked and replied to by the original video creator @Sweeneytv, reads, “appreciate the love brother, respect!” This version of the video and @Broxh’s comment on it are both notable for the seeming disconnect between upholding one streamer for their good, “wholesome” behavior while making a point to deride (and arguably encourage the harassment of) another streamer for their “greedy” behavior. (@Broxh does not appear to have commented on the wholly positive and “wholesome” @ItsTwitch version of his clip on YouTube, which does not make a point to contrast his behavior with that of other streamers; while this might be due to a series of factors including the element that @Sweeneytv is himself a fellow Twitch streamer to whom gratitude might be more expected, the shared visibility and popularity of the two videos nevertheless presents a notable contrast, given that one received a comment from the person whom the video featured and one seemingly did not). I note this not as an individualistic commentary or judgment on any of the users involved in this particular example, but as a useful case study in the cognitive dissonance that characterizes identification of “wholesome” and “greedy” behavior on Twitch, and more broadly speaking, the cognitive dissonance that characterizes users’ relationships with both affect and compensation on Twitch.

Capital and Financial Exchanges

Where emotion characterizes much of the rhetoric around Twitch exchanges as discussed above (with emphases on interpersonal phenomena like greed, generosity, and wholesomeness), another integral element of the platform is its inherently financial nature, even in seemingly social contexts. Characterizing capital exchanges as primarily *appearing* to occur between users, but in actuality almost entirely occurring as a flow from users to Twitch itself, I here want to highlight how affective frameworks in conversation with political economic approaches highlight key elements of the platform. The apparent agency that Twitch offers its users occludes the extent to which choice is inherently much more limited than it appears (on the most basic level, between not using Twitch at all, using Twitch and giving the platform ad revenue, or using Twitch and giving the platform subscription revenue).

The difference between the “wholesome” and “greedy” streamers, rather than having anything to do with their perceived sense of generosity or entitlement, has everything to do with the extent to which they recognize and acknowledge their platform transactions as being inherently financial in nature. The “wholesome” streamer is still recognized as such even if or when he passively approves the harassment of others because his “wholesomeness” is only determined by his treatment of the consuming viewer as customer, not his treatment of fellow streamers as competitors or coworkers. Conversely, the “greedy” streamer is derided for her explicit recognition of the economic system that characterizes Twitch. If she made money from the platform as streamers are expected to, by performing effusive gratitude for every subscription she received as if it were a donation rather than payment, she would be tolerated as a cog in the Twitch machine that sufficiently maintains its transactional nature. But by railing against viewers who get “hours of” entertainment and social interactions from her without paying her in return, she briefly removes the veil. This behavior seems to be considered by offended users to be especially galling and unacceptable when it comes from marginalized streamers, in part because Twitch is already characterized by routine discrimination.[23]

Twitch streamers are expected to perform affective labor, manipulating their own behaviors for the express purpose of making their viewers happy, whether or not they are financially compensated in return. This expectation is partially upheld by the platform itself, because in order to become an Affiliate who can receive subscriptions, ad revenue, and Bit cheering in the first place, a streamer must reach fifty followers and an average of three viewers, among other things, both of which will necessitate a certain amount of affective labor that draws in and keeps the interest of viewers.[24] The expectation of uncompensated affective labor is also upheld by the cultures that users have created within Twitch, as when streamers like @broxh_ are, counterintuitively, explicitly financially rewarded by their viewers for their humble denial of payment.

The “greedy” Twitch streamer is “greedy” not because she wants payment in exchange for providing the platform and its users with content to consume, but rather because she recognizes and forces viewers to briefly recognize the fact that what she is doing is work rather than play, for which she expects to be paid per the terms of Twitch as a platform. What she ostensibly failed to recognize was that streamers are expected to quietly and humbly work without any payment for potentially indefinite periods of time in order to eventually be graciously rewarded with capital, for which they must perform subservient gratitude. Failure to do so marks a streamer not as an employee who is angry for not having received their paycheck, but instead as ungrateful, arrogant, and entitled. This is because Twitch as both platform and culture cannot function without obfuscation of both capital and its exchanges.

Obfuscation allows for and lends itself to potentially extreme inequities among streamers, even when we limit our consideration to only those streamers who are successful enough to be Affiliates who have subscriptions enabled on Twitch in the first place. As is the case across industries in contemporary capitalism, major wage gaps and inequalities are likely the name of the game in Twitch streaming. This is possibly at least one cause of viewers' backlash against "ungrateful" and "greedy" streamers for their behaviors; if a viewer believes that a given streamer makes far more than they do, they will be understandably annoyed when that streamer asks for or seems to demand payment from them. This is another reason why payment is hidden in euphemisms like "cheering," "subscribing," and "gifting," which attempt to soften the inherently transactional nature of the exchange.

The existence of the Twitch Ambassadors guild to which @broxh_ belongs speaks to the high emphasis on affective labor that coexists with and even relies on the frequent obfuscation of Twitch's financial systems. According to the website, "Twitch Ambassadors positively contribute to the Twitch community—from being role models for their community, to establishing new content genres, to having inspirational stories that empower those around them, these creators embody what it means to #BleedPurple."[25] The benefits of being a Twitch Ambassador, which include having one's channel be promoted on the home page and being invited to TwitchCon, seem to be inherently financial in nature, but with no indication of the exact monetary amount that is associated with these features. As is the case with other elements of Twitch, this lack of capital visibility on the platform lends itself to various types of inequity, including most obviously the potential for large pay gaps among streamers based on race, gender, nationality, and other factors. One of the results of the potential for this inequity is that marginalized streamers in particular might be the subject of vitriol and backlash for real or perceived solicitation of payment.

The infrastructure of Twitch encourages viewers to see streamers as their friends while encouraging streamers to see viewers as their cash cows, from which they are entitled to take as much capital as possible, but simultaneously, to which they must constantly capitulate and perform appeasement in an elaborate illusion of subservience. Given this, it seems inevitable that the dramatic disconnect between these coexisting elements of the platform will sometimes lead to painful reality checks and harsh subsequent conflicts.

Conclusion: Agency, Autonomy, and Personhood

By bridging the literature on Twitch's financial and affective elements, this article has demonstrated some of the broader implications of these areas of study. In the face of vulnerability[26] to doxxing, harassment, and other forms of control, whether corporate, interpersonal, and/or more broadly systemic, digital users turn to features like the Twitch subscription system in order to try to access a sense of autonomy that is both individual and collective. Whether or not various communities on Twitch are completely sincere or "real" does not matter as much as the extent to which they feel real for the people who turn to them. This is similar to some of the "wholesome" content that characterizes subgenres on platforms like TikTok. People turn to it in order to lay claim to a *feeling* of community and communal autonomy. So, in the face of extreme alienation caused by not just capitalism writ large but also by other forms of systemic oppression, users can (sometimes compulsively) consume things like wholesome content (as when a "TavernTok" fantasy character gives "you" a "hug" and tells "you" to go to sleep[27]) or participate in Twitch communities to try to have a sense of not just autonomy and control, but also a sense of personhood itself. Autonomy and control are important for users in the face of having little to no real control over platform politics, the latter of which both enable and encourage routine targeted harassment while maintaining a pretense of neutrality and benevolent objectivity. As Helen Thornham writes, "algorithmically vulnerable communities are those whose lives are overly determined by algorithms and automated systems, for whom the decision-making power of algorithmic systems is felt in a lived and embodied sense, and who are conceptualised and identified ('dividuated') by systems in ways that rarely match up with their own sense of identity."[28] Platform politics that shape the very lived experiences of users themselves are both inescapable and oppressive (e.g. facial recognition technologies used to surveil public protests) and characterized by some potential for liberatory autonomy (e.g. the live streaming of those protests in the first place[29]).

In response to this algorithmic vulnerability, personhood and autonomy are claimed in a variety of ways. In the Twitch example, you are still real despite the fact that you might be dealing with a variety of systemic or (inter)personal issues, and the proof that you are real and a person lies in the fact that the Twitch streamer on your computer screen says *your* username and thanks you after you subscribe to them. You might feel a sense of autonomy and a sense of achieved goodness by helping this person. Whether or not they "really" needed your help, whether or not they make four times as much as you make in a year, they might feel like your friend whom you have helped, and in helping them, you might feel that you have made the world a slightly better place. This is both a potentially dangerous, politically subduing phenomenon, and also one that is seemingly completely unavoidable for some, if not all, participants in contemporary digital culture.

Ultimately, I believe that these elements of autonomy can and should be recognized as coexisting on Twitch. It is only natural that users will find ways to derive pleasure and hope from whatever systems they exist within. While it is important for us to recognize that Twitch as a platform exists not to connect users but to capitalize off of them, we can and should also recognize that users have the ability to make their own uses out of this platform and its monetizing features. Here and in future considerations, we might examine the relationships, overlaps, and distinctions among concepts such as mutual aid, digital sex work, and streaming labor.

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Call the (Bot-)Police: User-Led Platform Governance of "(In)Authenticity" on Instagram

by Nathalie Schäfer | Digital Platforms and Agency, Issue 14.2 (Fall 2025)

ABSTRACT The pervasive practice of botting by using fame-enhancing bots and operating porn bots, and Instagram's opaque and unreliable authenticity governance, has evoked human Instagram users to actively police and govern botting and other bot activity. Botting describes repetitive and quantitative posting, messaging and engaging on social media platforms to provoke reciprocal engagement. Running bot police accounts, Instagram users engage and try to play an active role in the authenticity governance process of Instagram. The article investigates why and how Instagram users govern two types of "inauthentic" Instabots, which concentrate on detecting automated interactions by fame-enhancing bots and reporting porn bots. Two case studies of three Instagram accounts and their content show different approaches to user-led authenticity governance and how these profiles perceive themselves as custodians of "authenticity." The key findings reveal that their activities of pillorying and collective flagging are considered digital vigilantism that potentially cause harm to other users. Furthermore, they show mechanisms of peer surveillance and mutual moderation on a user level, and complex power asymmetries between the platform company, its moderation systems, advertisers, and its users.

KEYWORDS Instagram, authenticity, botting, governance, surveillance

Introduction

"Too much harmless content gets censored, too many people find themselves wrongly locked up in 'Facebook jail,'" said Joel Kaplan, Meta's Chief Global Affairs Officer, on January 7, 2025, to justify the end of independent third-party fact-checking at Meta.[1] This statement highlights the core problem of Meta's platform governance. Surprisingly, the company admits to the failure of its content moderation and platform governance. However, Meta neglects the other side of the issue: too little content containing fake news, hate speech, or porn bots is censored or "locked up in Facebook jail." This further illustrates their unwillingness to act as custodians of their platforms and accept the responsibility of ensuring a safe online environment. The same applies to Instagram, Facebook's associated platform under Meta. By introducing community notes, the company is shifting responsibility to their users despite the existence of user-level governance features, such as flagging, that have long been established on the platform. Meta has allowed the development of practices for user-led policing of "inauthentic" behavior. The goal was to lock away fame-enhancing bots and porn bots in "Instagram jail" to use Kaplan's phrasing.

My research interest centers on the contradictions and double standards in Meta's platform governance that arise from its ambiguous concept of "authenticity," which underpins its opaque and unreliable authenticity governance. The user-led initiative of bot police profiles involved creating new accounts on the platform to establish an Instagram bot police.These profiles detected and documented information about fame-enhancing botting and porn bots. Botting refers to repetitive and quantitative posting, messaging and engaging on social media platforms and involves, in this specific case, fame-enhancing bots to automate posting and engagement. After detection the bot police profiles ensnared the bots to interact with them, publicly pilloried their usernames, and flagged and reported them. In this regard, the bot police enforced the platform's inherent peer surveillance and its call for mutual moderation. The limited possibilities for action led the bot police to elevate themselves above other Instagram users and to engage in digital vigilantism.

In this study, I examine two distinct bot policing methods that are effective in detecting botting and reporting porn bots. This contribution explores how the platform shapes and influences user agency by investigating why and how user-led bot policing contributes to Instagram's authenticity governance, ensuring alignment with the platform's and bot police's definitions of "authentic" behavior. A comprehensive analysis of user-led bot policing, employing qualitative visual and textual analysis as well as thick description, revealed more intricate dynamics than simply ordinary users reporting botting and porn bots on Instagram.[2] These dynamics highlighted broader power imbalances between the platform and its users and the challenges in regulating user behavior within a privatized, capitalist, public, online environment.

In the first section, I review the challenges posed by "inauthentic" behavior to Instagram's platform moderation and its current implementation. Authenticity governance on Instagram is two-fold: on one hand, the platform often deploys automated governance systems to moderate "inauthentic" behavior. On the other hand, enforced by specific features, the platform allows for peer surveillance and mutual moderation. The following section describes two types of bots that the platform and the bot police consider "inauthentic," which represent the targets of the bot police. It discusses the concept of "authenticity" in relation to botting and the challenges and complexities of detecting fame-enhancing and porn bots. It also includes a literature review on coordinated behavior and the integration of users into platform governance through the flagging feature. The third section introduces the methodology before I analyze two case studies of user-led bot policing approaches. I draw on Tarleton Gillespie's idea of platforms as the "custodians of the Internet" to reveal the bot police's self-understanding as custodians of "authenticity" on Instagram.[3] At the same time, I show that they act as vigilantes, potentially harming other users. My analysis further reveals the mechanisms of peer surveillance and the complex power asymmetries between the platform and its users and between users and other users.

This article adds to a growing body of literature that explores the agency of users in social media platform governance by studying the unexamined practice of user-led bot policing through this lens. The research contributes to interdisciplinary research on platform culture, bot detection, and platform governance. It is a starting point for research into user-led policing and participation in authenticity governance on Instagram.

Peer Surveillance and Mutual Moderation Inherent to Instagram’s Authenticity Governance

Various intentions for engaging in so-called “inauthentic” and unwanted behaviors challenge the moderation of social media platforms. Tarleton Gillespie discusses platform moderation as an integral and essential element of digital platforms, although one that they “take on reluctantly.”[4] The outcome of moderating user-generated content, behavior, and engagement of users results in platforms being obliged to moderate, which is why Gillespie conceptualizes them as custodians of the Internet. Platform companies employ different governance strategies, which Thomas Poell and colleagues summarize as regulation, curation, and moderation.[5] One crucial strategy of platform governance is content moderation, which is complex and aligns with the platforms’ diverse interests. As part of Meta, Instagram shares its resources for content moderation with other platforms of the parent company, such as Facebook.[6] Instagram promotes its platform governance aimed at undesirable, harmful, or illegal content and behaviors. Meta developed a complex system to manage this content, as Mark Zuckerberg noted in retrospect, “partly in response to societal and political pressure.”[7] From 2016 to 2025, a independent third-party fact-checking program was part of Meta’s content moderation. Initially, the program was introduced during a time of “heightened concern about information integrity coinciding with the [first] election of Donald Trump as US president,” amid heated discussions about how social media platforms foster the spread of misinformation and disinformation. Ironically, Meta has canceled independent fact-checking due to “too much censorship” and has claimed its “fundamental commitment to free expression.”[8] The press surrounding Zuckerberg’s announcement of the cancellation connects this step to an attempt to improve relations with the recently inaugurated for a second term, US President Trump.[9] With this rollback on moderation, Meta withdraws from responsibilities and places them on their users. The shift to community notes exemplifies how a platform’s governance is influenced by its political and economic interests.

Gillespie observed in his 2018 book on content moderation that “most [platforms] would prefer if either the community could police itself or, even better, users never posted objectionable content in the first place.”[10] Specific mechanisms for mutual moderation have long been part of Instagram’s platform culture, with specific affordances implemented in its interface. The report feature enabled a form of peer surveillance and the development of flagging practices. According to media scholar Oliver Leistert, peer surveillance is already inherent to social media platforms because it invites users to constantly express themselves and comment on others.[11] This aligns with Nicole Cohen’s findings, which outline a political economy of Facebook through the valorization of surveillance and “the unpaid labor of producer-consumers that facilitates this surveillance.”[12] The transition between communicating with one another and monitoring each other is particularly fluid on social media platforms. Leistert defines peer or lateral surveillance as the mutual observation and monitoring of one another, referring to Mark Andrejevic.[13] The fundamental basis of the surveillance paradigm of commercial capitalist platforms is the valorization of the expressions and affects of users, whose likes, shares, and other clicks are analogous to unpaid labor. Given the economic value of user engagement and the effect of producing marketable data for advertisers, it is logical that the platforms are interested in their understanding of “authenticity.” Peer surveillance culminates in the mutual tracking of unwanted content and behavior on the platform, ultimately benefiting its owners.

However, moderating social media platforms involves more than just curating user-generated content. Sarah Myers West has noted that discussions about content moderation have mainly concentrated on the content itself. As platforms have become central private infrastructures for our work, lives, and communities, moderation debates should broaden to encompass the effects of moderating user behavior overall.[14] The moderation of engagement is another crucial aspect of platform governance. Johan Lindquist and Esther Weltevrede define this specific platform moderation as regulating "the boundary between 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' account behavior."[15] Consequently, platforms create systematic and often automated governance systems to moderate "inauthentic" behavior. Wendy Chun refers to this as "algorithmic authenticity," highlighting how the platform's methods "reveal the ways in which users are validated and authenticated by network algorithms."[16] Lindquist and Weltevrede term this platform moderation "authenticity governance" and ground their study in issues of misinformation and disinformation, tackling the metrification, monetization, and political influence of social media. Social media platforms have shifted toward authenticity governance, revising their policies and moderation systems to regulate "inauthentic" behavior. The correlation of terms like "inauthenticity" and "fake engagement" embodies *platform paternalism* and scrutinizes the institutionalized power imbalance between platform companies and their users.[17] Through their regulatory authority, platforms determine what constitutes "acceptable" and "authentic" engagement, influenced by their capitalist and heteronormative logic.[18] Ariadna Matamoroz-Fernández, Louisa Bartolo, and Betsy Alpert argue that platforms have "constructed the notion of 'inauthentic behavior' as a flexible category" to allow for definitions that serve the platform's interests.[19] Users must continually negotiate the platform's definition of "authentic" behavior.[20]

“(In)Authentic” Instagram Bots

At this point, we must distinguish between two types of bots considered “inauthentic” by the bot police, and which are featured in the two case studies. Both bot types challenge the dichotomies between human authenticity and non-human artificiality on social media platforms.[21] The first case study of user-led bot policing targets fame-enhancing bots, which are automated or semi-automated accounts on Instagram. Fame-enhancing bots repetitively and quantitatively post and engage with other users to provoke reciprocal engagement and, as a result, improve engagement metrics, which has a positive effect on the account’s visibility and reach. Therefore, fame-enhancing botting is a strategy users employ as a response to the platform’s governance systems, which demand “an artisanal non-instrumental approach to cultural production”[22] while simultaneously rewarding the opposite behavior with visibility.[23] To be recognized as human users and avoid detection by the platform’s governance algorithms, fame-enhancing bots are programmed to mimic “human” behavior by sharing content and performing interactions such as liking, following, and commenting within a specific and predetermined timeframe and quantity.[24] Automatically performed interactions are complex to distinguish from those executed “manually” by human users, making them complex to detect. I term these automation services “fame-enhancing bots,” their use “botting,” and the respective user a “botter.” The obfuscated nature of botting and the fake profiles designed to circumvent detection pose challenges for both platforms and users in managing their presence. Some Instagram users consider automated engagement and content production as fake engagement, misinformation, and cheating, perceiving them as “inauthentic” behavior. Media coverage surrounding the bot service Instagress’s shutdown in 2017 even characterized the use of botting services as shameless moral deviance and criminality.[25] In examining the Instagress shutdown, Caitlin Petre, Brooke Duffy, and Emily Hund found that the discourse around it invoked “authenticity” concerning audiences: “Specifically, the notion of 'real follower' was used to distinguish human-run accounts from automated ones (i.e., bots)."[26] Although the metrification and monetization of social media engagement exemplify the need to move beyond the dualisms of fake vs. real,[27] "inauthentic" behavior has often been associated with malicious conduct and content.[28] However, it is essential to differentiate among various forms of "inauthentic" behavior, as it is not always malicious or intended to mislead. Following Matamoroz-Fernández, Bartolo, and Alpert, I argue that the use of botting services as a strategy in the visibility game on Instagram can instead be conceptualized as defiance against platform power, not aimed at misleading or harming fellow users.[29] In many cases, botters are ordinary users seeking to challenge the opaque system of Instagram's algorithmic ranking.

By contrast, such an understanding of botting as a defiance of platform power does not extend to fake profiles or porn bots, which are the main targets of the bot police discussed in the second case study. Elena Pilipets, Sofia Caldeira, and Ana Marta Flores point out that "porn bots operate via sexual solicitation to capture attention."[30] The authors discuss Instagram's "mechanisms of computerized tracking," which enable social automation on the platform, referring to Agre's work on the capture model, which "has deep roots in the practices of applied computing through which human activities are systematically reorganized to allow computers to track them in real time."[31] Like fame-enhancing bots, these bots deploy circumvention tactics to avoid detection by sometimes running fake profiles that mimic existing human users.[32] Contemporary methods of detecting pornography involve human moderation and computer vision algorithms trained on extensive databases of nude images. Meta uses AI systems to assess whether posts on their platforms contain nudity or sexual activity before deciding whether to remove the content.[33] Pilipets and her colleagues found that their policies define sexual solicitation as a "'suggestive' post combined with a request for interaction," concluding that "it is a difficult playground for both human users and porn bots to navigate, for engagement in the form of clicks implies both the promise of attention and the risk of being de-platformed." Porn bots are used to capture sensitive data, spread malware, or entice users to click on links in their bios. These links often redirect to questionable dating or porn websites behind costly paywalls.[34] Social media platforms like Instagram provide the infrastructure for spreading spam, scams, misinformation, and disinformation. A study by the European non-profit organization AI Forensics on pornographic ads revealed Meta's double standards in moderating pornographic visuals, which are removed when uploaded by a user but promoted when uploaded as a paid advertisement.[35] These double standards negatively affect human content creators more than porn bots.[36] Research into Instagram's platform governance has revealed serious effects on its users.[37]

In addition to overseeing content, Meta introduced its "coordinated inauthentic behavior" (CIB) policies in 2017 and released its findings on CIB in late 2018. Instagram announced the implementation of machine learning tools to identify accounts deploying third-party services for "inauthentic" likes, follows, or comments and to eliminate "inauthentic" activities. Furthermore, they indicate that continued use of third-party services may result in restricted Instagram usage.[38] Coordinated behavior has been examined in relation to disinformation and the manipulation of public opinion in computational social science.[39] Further studies on users' involvement in platform governance focus on the labor and impact of volunteer moderators across various social media platforms.[40]

So far, Meta grants a strongly defined and restricted form of agency and power to act against "inauthentic" behavior to users of their services. The possible sanctions that users can impose against unwanted behavior are limited and built into the interface design. Research on specific features such as flagging has addressed the involvement of users in the platform governance process. Platforms appear to have shifted agency to users through the flagging feature, empowering them to report seemingly inappropriate activity and monitor one another.[41] Kate Crawford and Tarleton Gillespie assert that flags are integrated as a key component of platform governance devolved to users "as a mechanism to elicit and distribute user labor—users as a volunteer corps of regulators."[42] Users do not receive any education or training, which allows for speculation and interpretation and places some users above others without providing a defined framework. Consequently, there is a significant risk that users will act based on their personal discretion and interests. Crawford and Gillespie have described instances such as gamified flagging among friends.[43] Flagged posts and profiles are frequently reviewed and assigned to underpaid workers with unclear review processes.[44] As Myers West points out, user flagging remains crucial for identifying content that requires removal, thereby affecting the effectiveness of content moderation.[45] The flagging process and subsequent actions taken on a flagged item are opaque and lack transparency, leading to a contentious debate in the literature. Some view it as a vital mechanism in content moderation and an effective strategy to combat misinformation.[46] Others underscore the threats of misuse for specific communities. Carolina Are's study illustrates that flagging is used maliciously on platforms like Instagram and TikTok as a silencing tactic, resulting in de-platforming that harms vulnerable and marginalized communities.[47]

However, research has yet to examine the role of users in governing botting with fame-enhancing bots and porn bots on Instagram. In analyzing the case studies, I will closely investigate the agency of the bot police and the complex power dynamics at play. The preceding discussion indicates that user-led bot policing on Instagram appears to fulfill Meta's aspirations: Instagram users who voluntarily detect, flag, and report botting and porn bots. The following section examines why and how user-led bot policing contributes to Instagram's authenticity governance to ensure compliance with the platform's and the bot police's understanding of "authentic" behavior.

Authenticity Governance Through User-Led Bot Policing

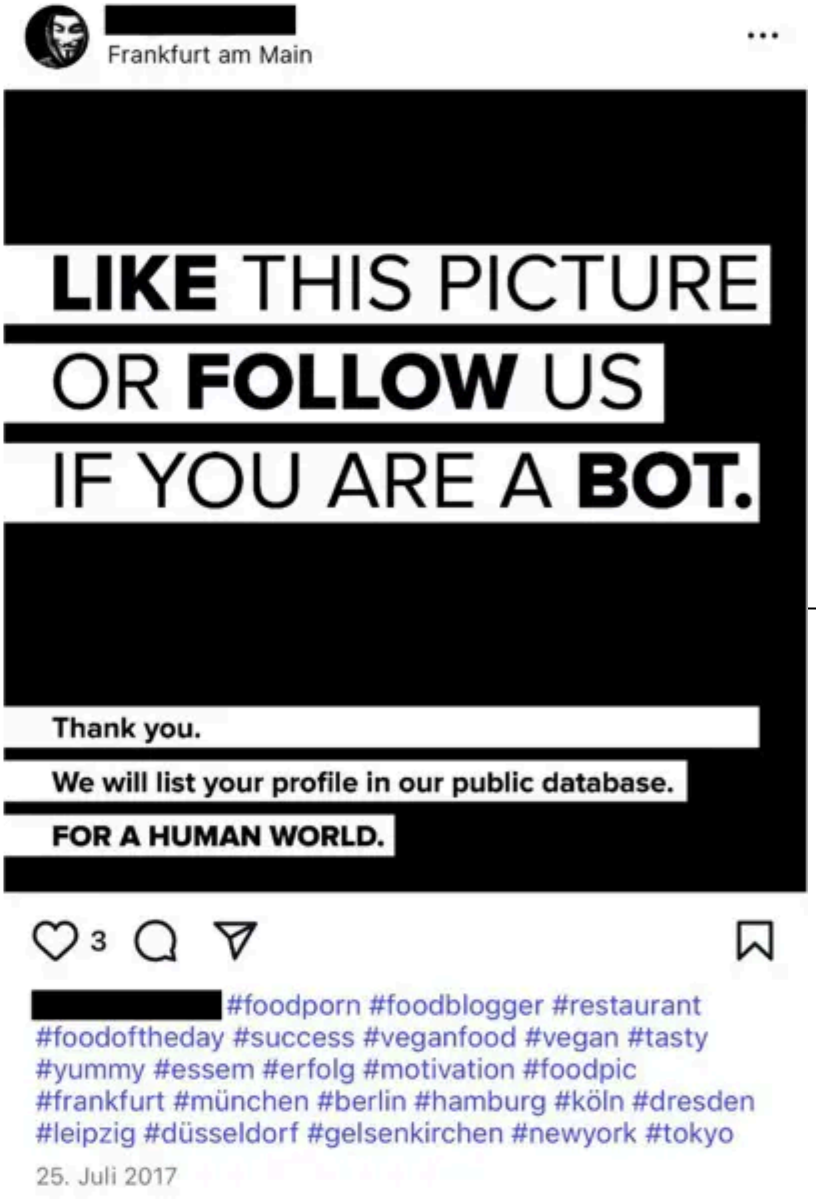
To ground the preceding arguments empirically and reveal the power dynamics, this section turns to two bot policing profiles as case studies that employ different strategies and vary in their approaches and actions against botting and porn bots. Examining these two profiles aims to showcase diverse examples of bot policing targeting two distinct types of bots. The profiles were selected for several reasons: the first case study of bot policing focused exclusively on combating automated interactions from botters deploying fame-enhancing bots, offering valuable insights into botting practices. The second case study featured both a German and a US bot police profile. The German bot police profile was chosen from a coordinated group of bot police officers, potentially initiated in response to a surge of spam bots in early 2019.[48] Most German bot policing profiles were primarily active in 2019, whereas the US bot police serve as an active example with a notable number of followers. The German bot police group has appeared inactive since 2020, having published their last posts that year. The profiles did not provide reasoning for their cessation, but before this, the movement announced its aim to eliminate bots by setting a deadline of 2020, using the hashtag #nobotsby2020. Reaching their time limit could explain their abandonment of this goal. The US bot police profile also employed the hashtag #nobotsby2020. Unlike the German bot police, this profile remains active as of August 2024. One of their story highlight folders proudly features popular Instagrammers with over two million followers following the bot police profile. Their support and their substantial follower count are sources of legitimacy for them.

These case studies offer a distinct, publicly observable perspective on various user-led practices aimed at countering botting and porn bots. A qualitative visual and textual analysis of the profiles was carried out to understand user-led bot policing on Instagram, focusing on its objectives and strategies. This method considers the co-constitutive relationship between Instagram accounts and the components of the profile's posts, including content, hashtags, captions, comments, and interaction metrics.[49] Instagram's built-in search functions enable users to search for usernames and hashtags; hashtags serve both as an "initial point of departure for studying activity on Instagram" and as tools to locate and trace data.[50] Data for this study was manually collected through the Instagram user interface and preserved using screen capture. This approach ensured that the relevance of the data was assessed while minimizing data collection. The bot policing profiles were accessed in October 2023, March 2024, and August 2024. Data was gathered without consent but was re-verified to confirm it remained public before submission. The bot policing profiles do not disclose the identity of account holders. To protect Instagram users' privacy, all sensitive data or identifiable information of targeted botters has been excluded or anonymized. The study's limitations include a small qualitative sample of case studies and restricted access to data. The obfuscated nature of the research subject presents significant challenges for research in this field, as botting and porn bots operate at different and sometimes impossible levels of observability.

Furthermore, I used Clifford Geertz's concept of "thick description" to examine the culture of the bot police.[51] The thick description specifies details about their social structures, actions, and meanings, providing in-depth knowledge about how the bot police "feel, think, imagine, and perceive their world."[52] In this regard, thick descriptions help in understanding the context of the bot police's actions, "stat[ing] the intentions and meanings that organize the actions," "trac[ing] the evolution and development of the act," and "present[ing] the actions as a text that can be interpreted."[52] In this way, the methodological approach uncovers the power dynamics between the platform, its users, and their peers. The analysis emphasizes the complexity of moderation and authenticity governance through the interconnectedness of "authenticity" and artificiality on social media platforms. With case studies based in Germany and the USA, and as a researcher living and working in Germany, we learn about user-led bot policing from a Western and democratic perspective within a capitalist society. User-led bot policing may differ in non-Western and non-democratic environments, operating in different languages and online cultures with distinct platform values, potentially targeting various forms of “inauthentic” behavior on Instagram.

We Find Fame-Enhancing Bots—Case 1

The first case study examines actions taken against fame-enhancing bots. Botting, used as a visibility-enhancing tactic, is an example of users opposing the platform’s authenticity governance as defiance of platform power while simultaneously redefining the boundaries of “authenticity.” Visibility-enhancing tactics through automation are condemned as “contamination,” “crime/moral deviance,” and “cheating.”[54] These metaphors reveal the double moral standards upheld by social media platforms that deploy automation tools for content moderation and authenticity governance. The first bot policing profile aimed to expose the automated interactions of botters. As fame-enhancing bots are complex to detect, the bot policing profile devised a new strategy by posting content that non-botters were unlikely to engage with, in order to phish for and actively ensnare automated engagement (fig. 1).



[redacted]
Frankfurt am Main

LIKE THIS PICTURE
OR **FOLLOW** US
IF YOU ARE A **BOT.**

Thank you.
We will list your profile in our public database.
FOR A HUMAN WORLD.

3

[redacted] #foodporn #foodblogger #restaurant #foodoftheday #success #veganfood #vegan #tasty #yummy #essem #erfolg #motivation #foodpic #frankfurt #münchen #berlin #hamburg #köln #dresden #leipzig #düsseldorf #gelsenkirchen #newyork #tokyo

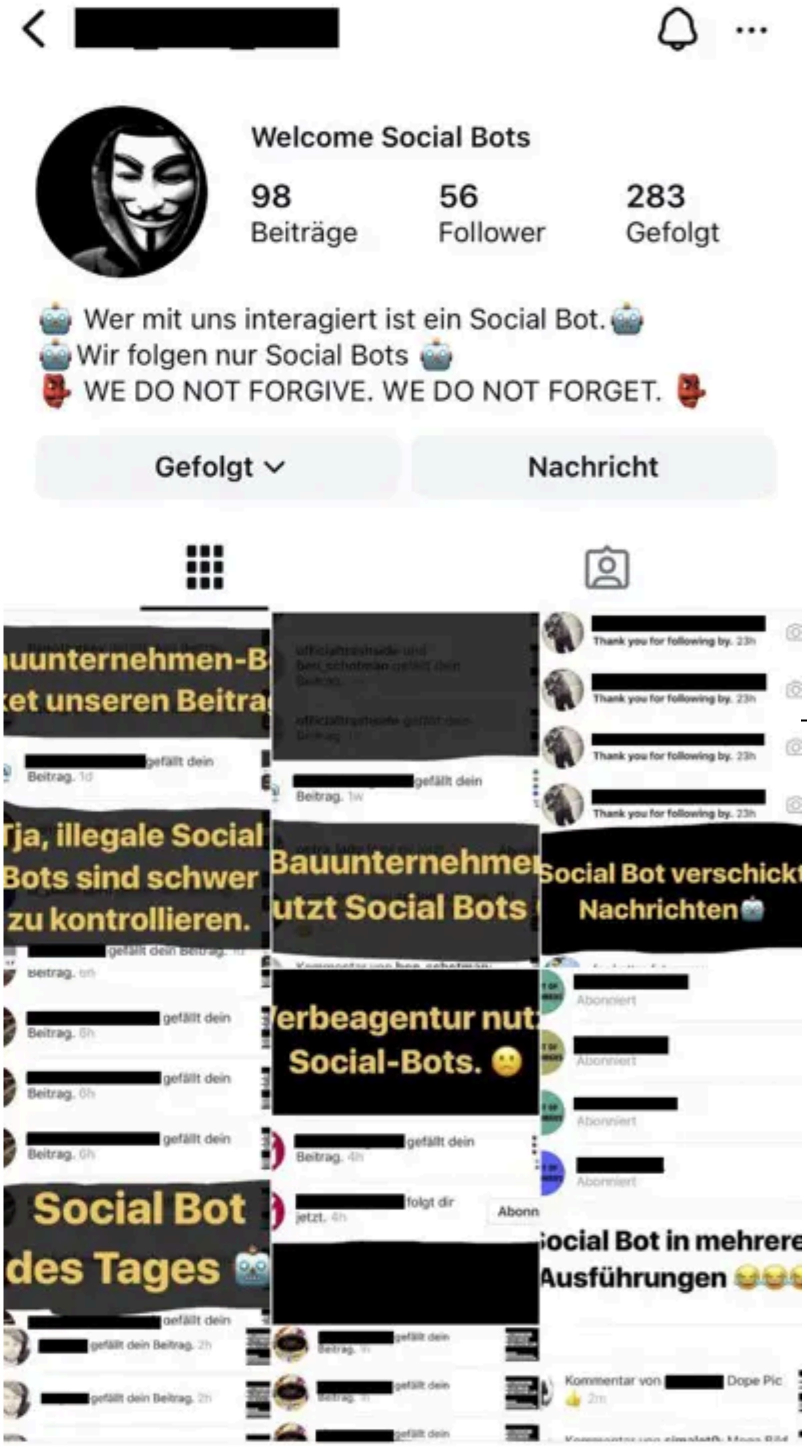
25. Juli 2017

<https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Call-the-Bot-Police_fig-1-Nathalie-Schafer.jpg>

Figure 1. Screenshot of a post by the bot policing profile.

At the same time, they ensured that non-botters would refrain from interacting with them by threatening public denunciation. In these phishing-for-engagement posts, they tagged various cities in Germany and included popular hashtags. The hashtags and location tags served as lures for botters since fame-enhancing bots must target specific hashtags or locations. Analyzing the interactions with the phishing posts made it impossible to verify whether a human or a bot had liked the content. Firstly, the profile assumed that every like was automatically generated and showed no indication of verifying in any manner whether they were automated likes. Secondly, as mentioned earlier, this raises questions about the status of likes and “authenticity” within the context of “algorithmic authenticity” in metrified and monetized social media environments. The dichotomies between “inauthentic” and “authentic,” fake and real, and human and artificial are neither sustainable nor useful because engagement on social media platforms inherently crosses these boundaries.

The comments on the posts were mainly vague and broad, often consisting of just a single emoji. One comment appeared to be made by a fame-enhancing bot, stating: “Thumbs up, beautiful photos☺️ I hope you like my profile, too. Best wishes, [botter’s name and affiliation].” Comments can only be tentatively attributed to fame-enhancing bots due to the lack of context, as seen in this instance. Instagram’s user interface does not provide features or tools for users to filter automated from manual engagement. Because of this limitation, this bot policing profile developed alternative methods of peer surveillance and mutual moderation. At the same time, they positioned themselves above other users, risking trapping potentially “real” and “authentic” engagement. By threatening other users with public denunciation, they shifted the power balance hierarchically downward.



[redacted]

Welcome Social Bots

98 Beiträge

56 Follower

283 Gefolgt

🤖 Wer mit uns interagiert ist ein Social Bot. 🤖

🤖 Wir folgen nur Social Bots 🤖

👺 WE DO NOT FORGIVE. WE DO NOT FORGET. 👺

Gefolgt ⌄
Nachricht
uunternehmen-B
ket unseren Beitra
Tja, illegale Social Bots sind schwer zu kontrollieren.
Bauunternehmer
utzt Social Bots
Social Bot verschickt Nachrichten 🤖
/erbeagentur nut
Social-Bots. 🙁
Social Bot des Tages 🤖
ocial Bot in mehrere Ausführungen 😂😂😂

<

https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Call-the-Bot-Police_fig-2-Nathalie-Schafer.jpg>

Figure 2. Screenshot of bot policing profile with profile picture and screenshots of the construction companies’ interaction with them.

While likes and comments constitute key modes of engagement, the account’s profile picture further contributes to their self-understanding as activists. The profile picture displayed a figure in a hoodie and a Guy Fawkes mask associated with the hacktivist movement Anonymous(fig. 2).[55] According to Christian Fuchs, Anonymous is a

> social movement and anti-movement; it is collective political action based on a shared identification with some basic values (such [as] civil liberties and freedom of the Internet) that results in protest practices online and offline against adversaries, and at the same time for many of those engaging on Anonymous platforms individual play and entertainment.[56]

What platform values does this profile likely align with, particularly on Instagram? Social media platforms are sites where values are “expressed, contested, and diffused.” Platform values refer to the “underlying principles governing and expressed through social media.”[57] A platform’s cultural values can be discerned by examining community norms, as illustrated through established “authenticity” practices or governing documents. Policy documents detail how various actors should behave and reveal the core principles of the platform company’s values. The user’s values are reflected through practices, usage patterns, and user-generated content. Key values on Instagram include engagement and “authenticity.” Hallinan and colleagues further emphasize that social media platforms “have simultaneously been credited with . . . championing authentic self-expression and incentivizing fake interactions.”[58] As previously noted, “authenticity” on social media is a vague term with varying interpretations depending on perspective.[59] Instagram articulates “authenticity” both as an informational mechanism and as a normative framework for user behavior. On one side, the platform adopts an informative understanding of the term, addressing the necessity of authentication and the importance of verification badges for specific users, such as businesses and public figures. On the other side, Instagram employs the term to indicate and communicate its expectations regarding how users should engage and conduct themselves on the platform, framing these expectations as essential for safety, trust, and security. Meanwhile, economic interests in user data and engagement drive the platform's expectation of "authentic" behavior. Instagram's definition of "authenticity" remains deliberately vague, allowing it to be flexibly adapted to changing objectives. The fact that Instagram's algorithmic ranking systems reward botting behavior suggests that they also benefit from the traffic generated by such engagement.

By contrast, users commonly interpret "authenticity" as being "oneself," emphasizing forms of "realistic" self-expression. This notion of individual "authenticity" remains ambiguous in itself. Instagram posts related to "authenticity" tend to address topics such as being yourself, self-care, and self-improvement. Ironically, the intended thought-provoking content is often connected to images containing highly professional composition, editing, and carefully curated backgrounds. It raises questions about the construction of identity online which is more complex than the expectation of "being oneself" online.[60] This notion of "authentic" likes is also referred to as "organic" or "genuine," implying that a liking user has a true interest in a post due to its content or their interest in the profile that posted it.[61] This simplistic and one-sided perspective fails to recognize the platform's culture and its inherent visibility game within the attention economy, overlooking the various motivations for engaging with content posts or comments, such as influencer pods.

The bot policing profile's reference to Anonymous highlights their identification with the hacker group that "constitute[s] a global, Internet-based social movement of primarily young and dissatisfied people who have decided to follow their own strategy to oppose established global governance and order."[62] The profile materializes this definition by actively running the account as a site of bot policing. In this case, the bot policing profile focused on authenticity governance and upholding their interpretation of platform values by bringing two approaches against botters into practice.

Firstly, they followed all profiles that interacted with them in any way, hereafter referred to as “followees.” One can assume that all their followees engaged in botting at some point. Followee numbers fluctuate over time, ranging between 280 (current count, January 2026) and 310 (at the time of first data collection in February 2023). Given the brief active period in July and August 2017 and the resulting follower reach, the number of botters interacting with them is noteworthy. This is significant both because it allows us to draw rare conclusions about the notable automated engagement during that time, and because it was the only opportunity thus far to observe engagement conducted by fame-enhancing bots since I began researching them in 2018.

Secondly, they shared screenshots of their notification of interactions list, which included a notification of a construction company that liked their posts (fig. 2). The bot policing profile commented: “Construction company uses social bots 😠.” The construction company again liked the screenshot, which prompted the bot police to post another screenshot, stating that illegal social bots would be challenging to regulate. This example pushed the mechanisms of peer surveillance to the extreme. Beyond their trap for automated engagement, they captured and published information about engagement metrics intended solely for their use. The notification feature exemplifies the metrification of engagement and the valorization of peer surveillance par excellence.

The bot policing profile, alongside other users engaging with the denunciation posts, viewed botting as a moral deviance and accused botters of lacking honor. Consequently, the bot policing profile devised its own strategy for authenticity governance, targeting botters by publicly shaming everyone interacting with their account and content. Favarel-Garrigues and colleagues describe this phenomenon as digital vigilantism, characterized by “a basic principle of ‘naming and shaming’, or through a ‘weaponisation of visibility’, that is sharing the target’s personal details by publishing/distributing them on public sites (‘doxing’).”[63] In this scenario, the personal details included the botter’s profile name and picture.

As the reasoning goes, the loss of honor typically leads to feelings of shame. Disgrace has likely existed as long as humanity itself and was a common formal punishment across virtually every culture. It was also one of the most prevalent punishments during the Catholic Church's Inquisition. These honor-related punishments were often executed before large audiences at the pillory. "Those who had forfeited their honor were subjected to public, often merciless, ridicule,"[64] which mirrors the strategy employed by this bot policing profile. Yet, there is a certain irony in that visibility was a central element of such vigilante campaigns, which have evolved into digital vigilantism. Applying this form of punishment to botters is highly problematic for at least three reasons: First, the bot policing profile lacked the authority to prosecute, judge, or punish botting. Second, botters seek visibility in defiance of Instagram's authenticity governance without the intent to harm, mislead, or endanger the community, which does not provide a solid basis for prosecution and mutual moderation. Third, pillorying is generally not an appropriate punitive measure for "inauthentic" behavior on Instagram, even though it has resurfaced and become a recurring phenomenon in online environments.

In this case study, the user-led bot policing action was restricted to detecting botting and publicly denouncing and pillorying botters. None of the posts or comments indicated that this bot policing profile flagged the trapped accounts. Although this public profile has not been active since 2017, it served as a unique archive and record of bot actions to enhance fame, considering the nearly three hundred accounts it follows.

Call the Bot Police—Case 2

The second case study of user-led policing focused on porn bots and featured profiles known as bot police, operating across various countries and in different languages. Two bot police accounts, one based in Germany and the other in the

USA, were selected to illustrate and analyze a different form of user-led bot policing within authenticity governance. Both profile names included the terms “bot” and “police,” accompanied by profile pictures depicting police officers. They distinguished between two types of porn bots. According to their observations, the first type typically had only one post that didn’t tag other users, yet they would regularly delete older posts and add new ones. The commentary function was mainly disabled. The German bot police profile reported that these porn bots present themselves as female users, and in some cases, offer nude content for sale.

The second type of bots included profiles that promoted links in their bios leading to spam or porn websites and those that commented in a “stupid” and “annoying” way which included using explicit pornographic language and suggestive emojis related to sexual themes. They contained “stupid” story highlights and bios with sex-related information. Another distinguishing feature of the bots identified by the German bot police profile was their use of formal German language forms to address other users, as opposed to the everyday language typically used on the platform. This formality likely stemmed from their reliance on translation tools like Google Translate, which may not account for context or the correct forms of address. While certain features overlapped and the bot police’s typology was not detailed enough to definitively distinguish two divers types, both refer to pornographic spam attempting to spread malware, monetize nude content, or entice users to click on links in their bios. Both bot profiles generated and shared knowledge about their targets and encouraged their followers to observe their peers, identify porn bots, and collaboratively moderate the actions of other Instagram users.

The profiles’ objectives focused on policing porn bots. Addressing users’ moderation efforts, Gillespie refers to them as amateur editors and police: “By shifting some of the labor of moderation, through flagging, platforms deputize users as amateur editors and police.“[65] It is no coincidence that Instagram users engaging in user-led bot policing refer to themselves as “bot police.” Traditionally, policing was defined as “a system to enable the well-being of individuals and the growth and welfare of the community.” [66] The term “police” has its roots in Classical Greek (politeia) and pertains to “all matters affecting the survival and welfare of the city.”[67] The shared linguistic root might suggest that only the institution of the police would be in charge of “policing.” Clive Emsley’s *A Short History of Police and Policing* illustrates a more complex development of the term “police,” highlighting how policing practices have been assigned to civil members of communities throughout history in order to enforce social norms. The bot police assumed the role of Instagram police, which does not align with the concept of police as an institution, recognized as a state organ and part of its executive authority. In the more restricted understanding, “police refers to the state authorities whose task it is to avert dangers to the individual and the general public, to protect public order and security and to prosecute criminal acts.”[68] The German bot police profile was labeled a “police station,” and the account holder self-identified as a voluntary bot police officer. This account was part of a group of German profiles with usernames referencing bot police or bot police officers. Several users with bot police profiles organized and coordinated themselves, utilizing a Discord server for a “united bot police” on Instagram. To gain access to this server and the group, interested future “police officers” could contact the administrators. This coordinated bot policing represented an attempt to institutionalize peer surveillance and mutual moderation of “inauthentic” behavior.

The case of the US bot police profile was somewhat unique. This profile operated as a single police officer without gathering additional police officers, though they managed their own Discord server. The US bot police profile also ran another account called FBBI, which stood for “Federal Bureau of Bot Investigation,” parodying the FBI of the United States. It served an entertaining purpose by sharing bot memes with the bot police profile’s large community of over 280,000 followers. They leveraged their reach to recruit their followers as voluntary “auxiliary policemen” to aid them in policing porn bots through coordinated collective flagging. Daniel Trottier described this phenomenon as digital vigilantism, where citizens were collectively offended by other users’ actions and retaliated through coordinated responses on digital media platforms, including mobile devices and social media.[69] The German bot police profile created a highlights folder with instructions on removing porn bots. The bot police explained how their followers could flag porn bots by showcasing a series of screenshots with instructions. These instructions included where to find the reporting function on Instagram’s interface and how to flag porn bots as spam. Both bot police profiles urged their followers to tag them or send links to porn bots, functioning as collection points for these reports. Subsequently, they published the information and called on their community to use their combined strength to flag and report collectively. This bot policing profile integrated the actions of peer surveillance, shaming, and digital vigilantism. Notably, the bot police highlighted the notification a user receives after flagging a profile and hinted at the platform’s review process. The notification contained information indicating that the platform blocked the account as a result of the bot police’s report. For the German bot police, this notification was a reward for their “successful” intervention against “inauthentic”’ behavior. A reel by the US bot policing profile demonstrated the rewarding effect of the action of reporting a porn bot (fig. 3).

bot_police
The Kid LAROI, Justin Bieber · STAY

View profile

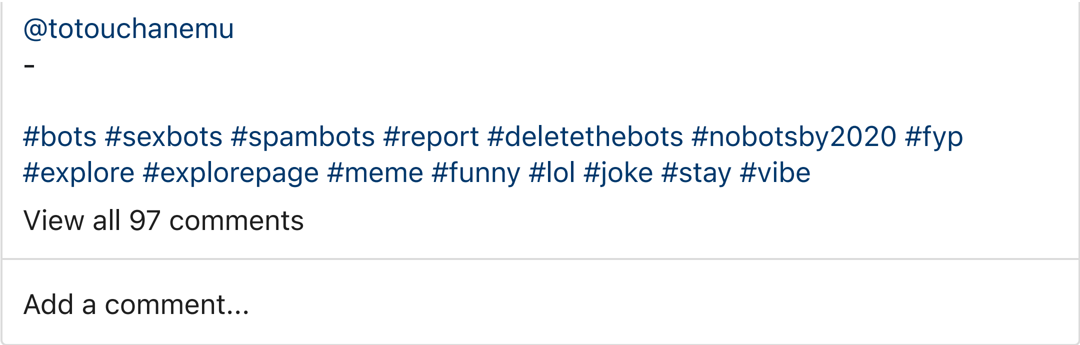
Watch on Instagram

View more on Instagram

16,720 likes

bot_police

How I feel after reporting a bot
-



@totouchanemu
-

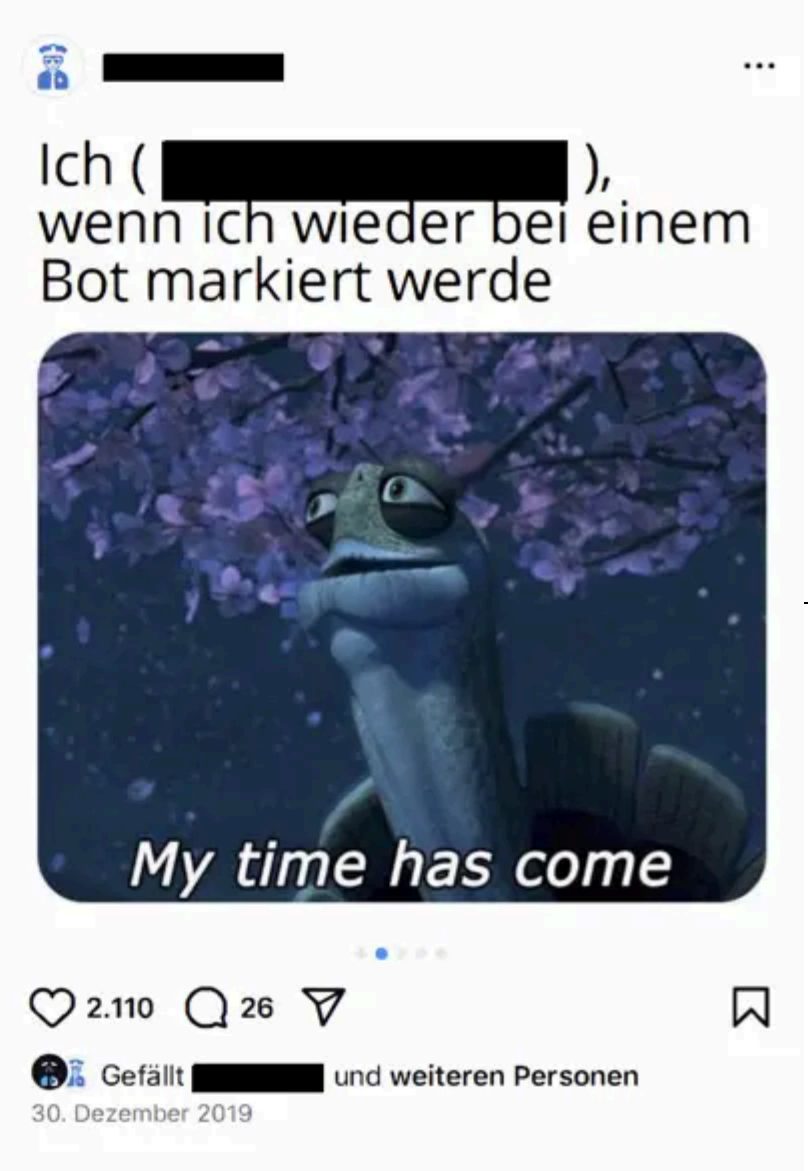
#bots #sexbots #spambots #report #deletethebots #nobotsby2020 #fyp #explore #explorepage #meme #funny #lol #joke #stay #vibe

View all 97 comments

Add a comment...

Figure 3. Reel demonstrating the rewarding effect of reporting porn bots.

Apart from that, both bot police profiles also had an entertaining factor for their followers. The German bot police profile entertained its followers with handcrafted memes. Most of their posts were memes that served different purposes. On the one hand, they represented the account holders' identification as a bot police officer who expressed their emotions about their work duties and successes and failures (fig. 4). On the other hand, they functioned as knowledge transfer about the "bot problem" and entertainment for the profile's followers. The memes had similar messages, addressing the vast number of bots on Instagram, the platform company that did not seem to care (fig. 5), and the enormous amount of work for the bot police (fig. 6). The memes showed how the bot police perceived Instagram's limited role in fighting porn bots on the platform, thereby positioning the bot police's own intervention as both necessary and justified.



[redacted]

Ich ([redacted]),
wenn ich wieder bei einem
Bot markiert werde

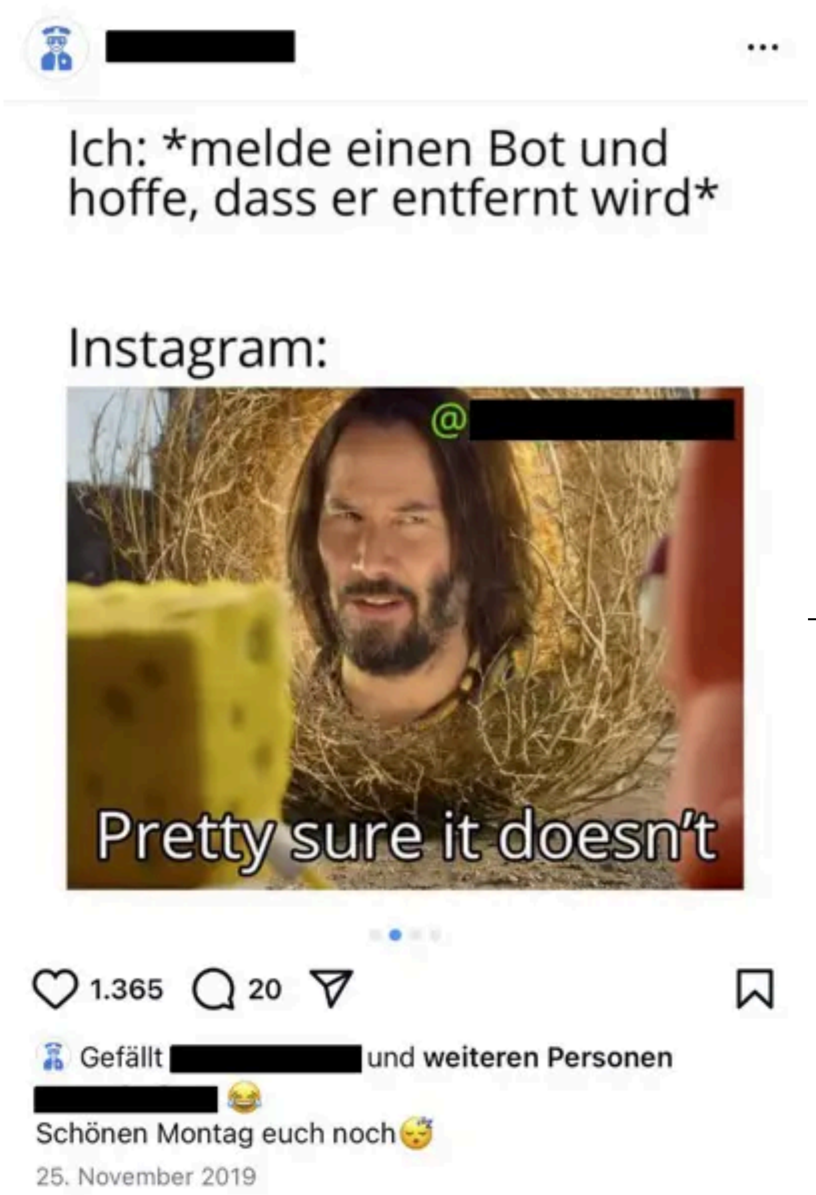
My time has come

2.110 26

Gefällt [redacted] und weiteren Personen
30. Dezember 2019

<https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Call-the-Bot-Police_fig-4-Nathalie-Schafer.jpg>

Figure 4. German bot policing profile conveying emotions about their work duties: “Me (@[bot police’s name]), when I get tagged on a bot again.”



[redacted]

Ich: *melde einen Bot und hoffe, dass er entfernt wird*

Instagram:

1.365 20

Gefällt [redacted] und weiteren Personen

[redacted] 😂

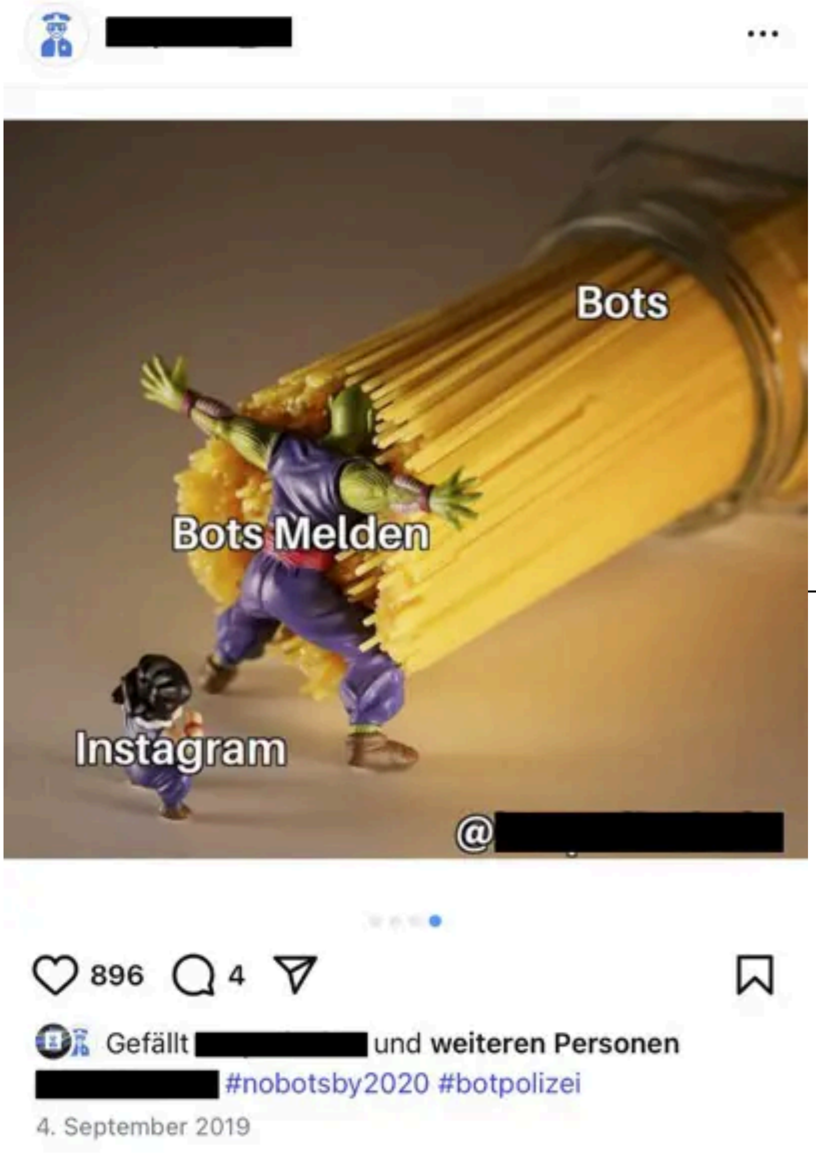
Schönen Montag euch noch😴

25. November 2019

<

https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Call-the-Bot-Police_fig-5-Nathalie-Schafer.jpg>

Figure 5. Meme indicating Instagram's carelessness: “Me: *reporting a bot and hoping that it will be banned*."



Gefällt [redacted] und **weiteren Personen**

[redacted] #nobotsby2020 #botpolizei

4. September 2019

<https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Call-the-Bot-Police_fig-6-Nathalie-Schafer.jpg>

Figure 6. Meme showcasing the German bot police's perceived enormous amount of work.

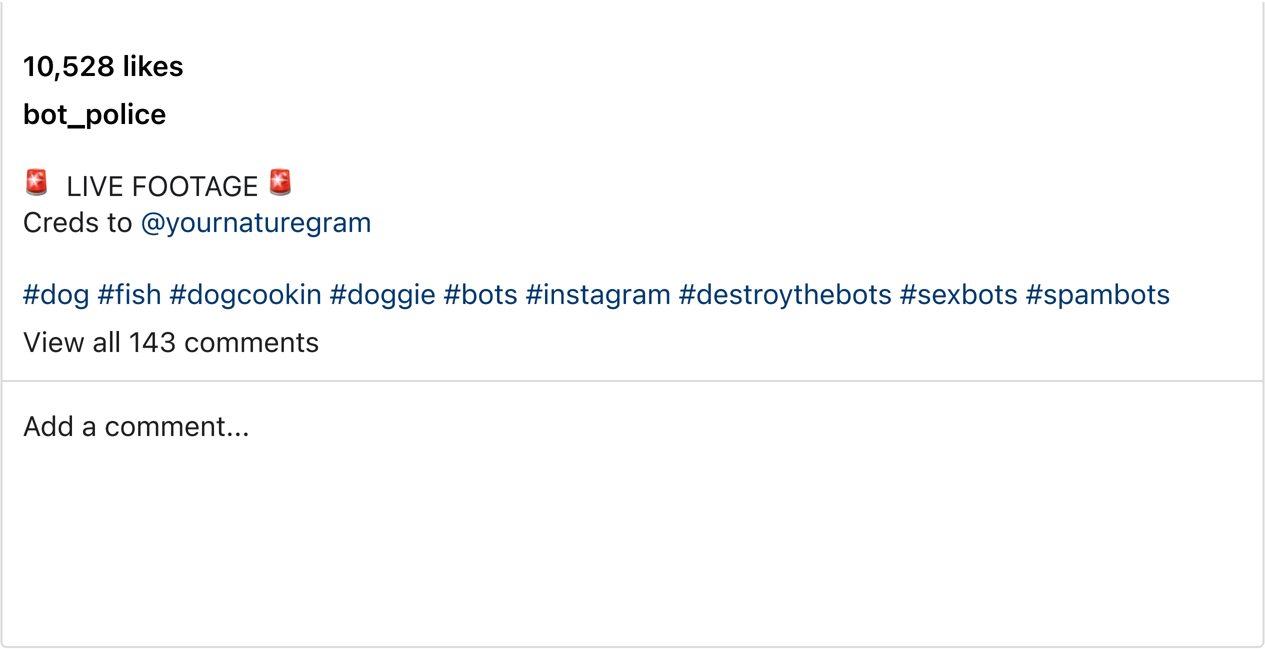
The US bot police posted similar memes and reels on their FBBI and the bot police profile (fig. 9) but, at the same time, communicated their respect for the platform. While the bot police's memes criticize Instagram for its insufficient actions against bots, yet do so in a notably restricted manner. (fig. 7).

bot_police
Original audio

View profile

Live footage of Instagram trying to take down bots
67
6,6

View more on Instagram



10,528 likes

bot_police

🚨 LIVE FOOTAGE 🚨
Creds to @yournaturegram

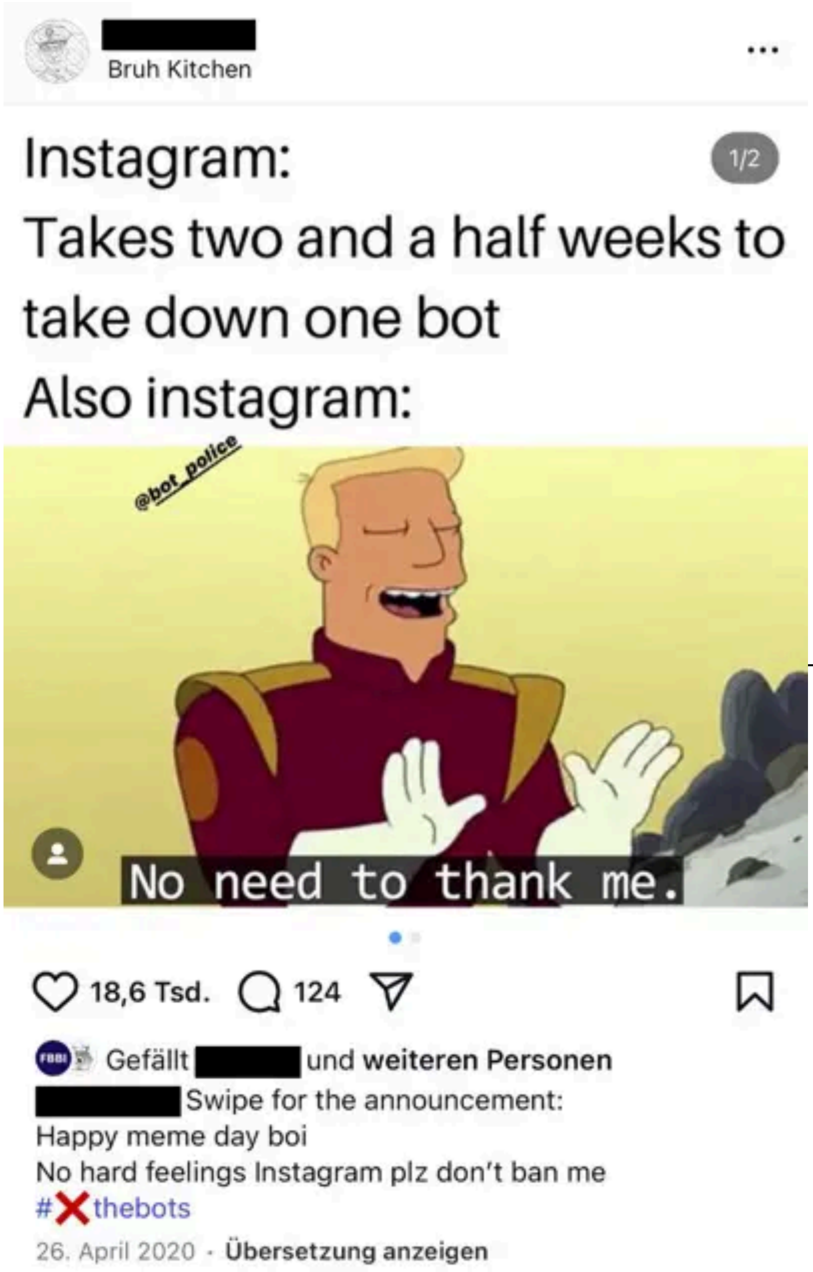
#dog #fish #dogcookin #doggie #bots #instagram #destroythebots #sexbots #spambots

View all 143 comments

Add a comment...

Figure 7. Reel humorously criticizing Instagram’s insufficient actions against porn bots.

The criticism was frequently accompanied by appeasing language in the caption, in which the bot police explicitly asked Instagram not to ban it, reflecting an awareness of the risk of platform sanctions and underscoring the asymmetric power relationship between users and the platform (fig. 8). There was no proof that Instagram had banned them. Still, the repeated plea emphasized the dependency and top-down power dynamic between the platform owners and their users. Furthermore, the memes, other content, and comments of the bot police indicated that the platform’s actions against reported profiles were opaque, incomprehensible, and unreliable. This argument and the research on the effects of moderation and de-platformization of nudity and sex-positive content following flaggings[70] supports the result of the AI Forensics study that Meta’s double standards affect human users rather than porn bots.



[redacted]
Bruh Kitchen

Instagram:
Takes two and a half weeks to take down one bot
Also instagram:

No need to thank me.

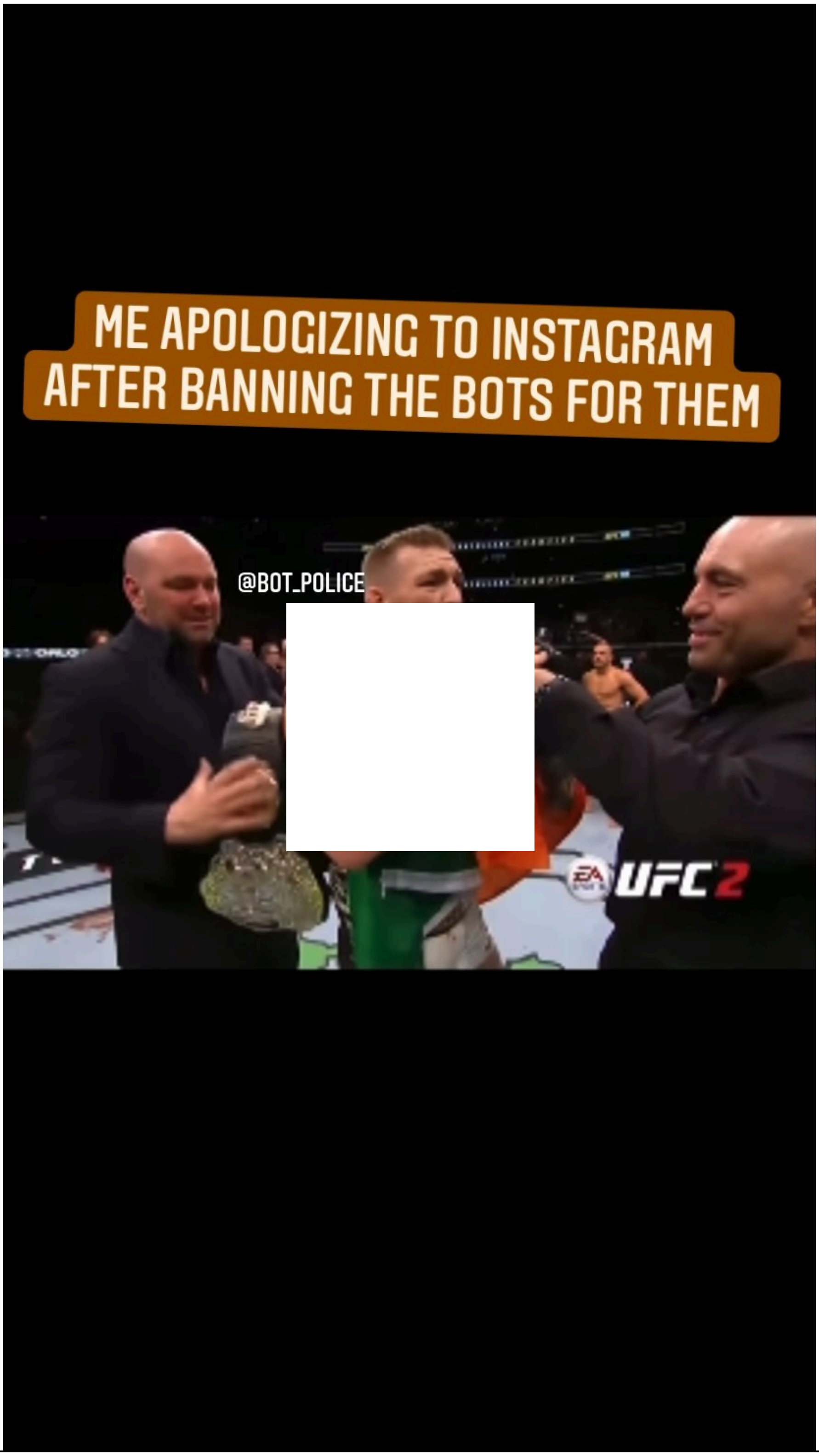
Gefällt [redacted] und weiteren Personen
[redacted] Swipe for the announcement:
Happy meme day boi
No hard feelings Instagram plz don't ban me
#❌thebots
26. April 2020 · Übersetzung anzeigen

<
https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Call-the-Bot-Police_fig-8-Nathalie-Schafer.jpg>

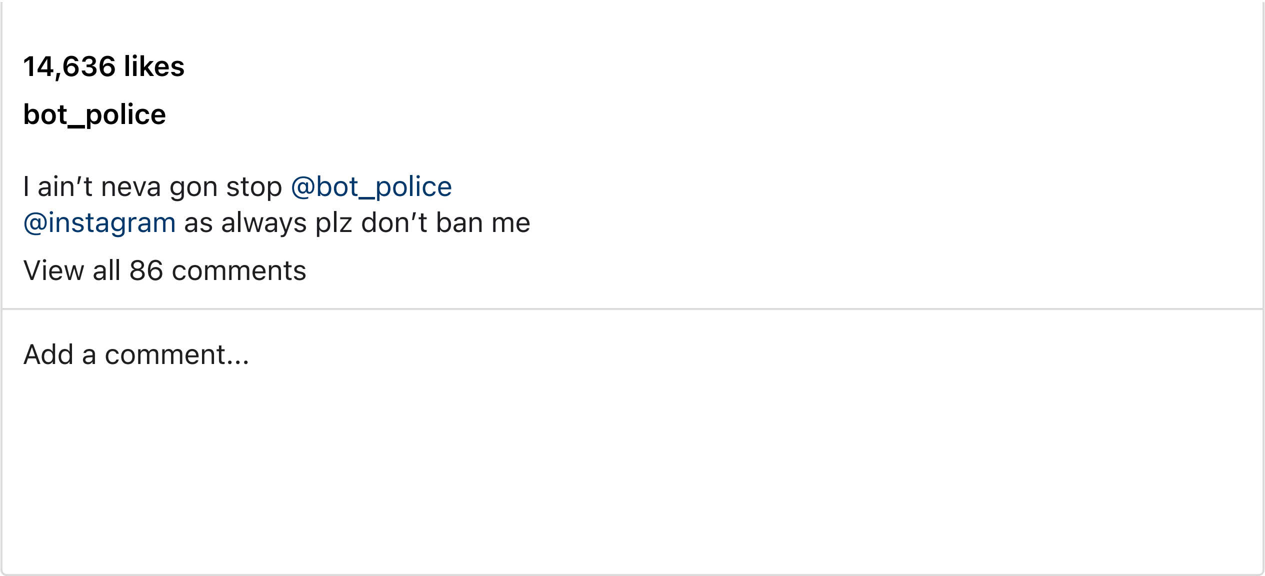
Figure 8. Bot meme by US bot police profile ironically visualizing Instagram's attitude as "No need to thank me."

bot_police
Original audio

View profile


ME APOLOGIZING TO INSTAGRAM AFTER BANNING THE BOTS FOR THEM
@BOT_POLICE
EA
UFC 2

View more on Instagram



14,636 likes

bot_police

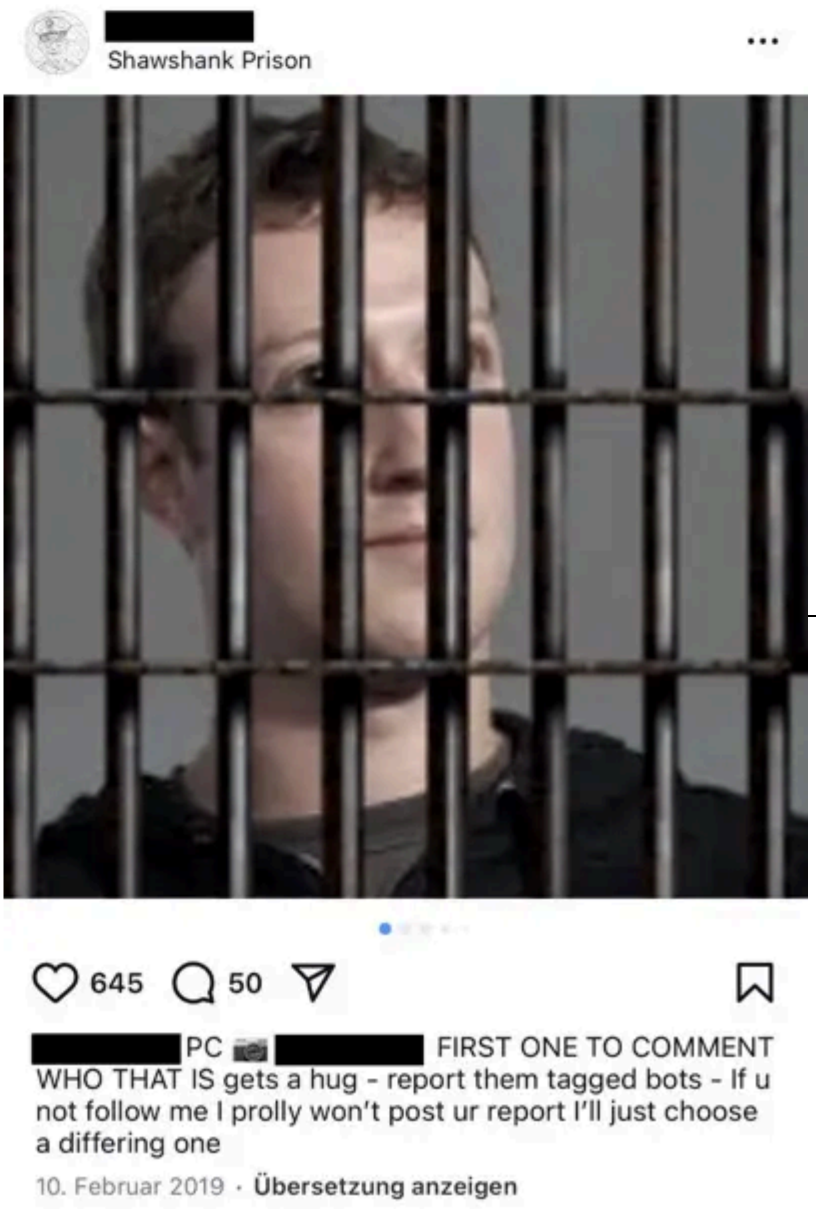
I ain't neva gon stop @bot_police
@instagram as always plz don't ban me

View all 86 comments

Add a comment...

Figure 9. Reel showcasing the US bot police profile's attitude towards Instagram: "I'd like to take this chance to apologize to absolutely nobody."

The US bot police profile used another strategy to entertain their community, provoke interaction, and attract new followers. They regularly posted images of well-known figures with a filter that put them literally behind bars, taking them metaphorically into custody, like in the example with Mark Zuckerberg (fig. 10). In the caption, they challenge their followers to guess and comment on their names. The first correct guess in the comments section was rewarded with visibility by tagging the winner in a following post. The visibility rewards highlight the visibility game that the platform's algorithmic ranking, attention economy, and culture affords. These posts were accompanied by screenshots of comment sections with porn speech or profiles showing nude content of targeted porn bot profiles. The profile's use of entertainment features and memes targeting Instagram exhibited characteristics of pillorying, as their large followership underscores the critical role of publicity and the audience, without which naming and shaming would be ineffective. As del Ama put it: "Public disgrace still has a high news value."[71]



[redacted]
Shawshank Prison

645 50

[redacted] PC 📷 [redacted] FIRST ONE TO COMMENT WHO THAT IS gets a hug - report them tagged bots - If u not follow me I prolly won't post ur report I'll just choose a differing one

10. Februar 2019 · Übersetzung anzeigen

<

https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Call-the-Bot-Police_fig-10-Nathalie-Schafer.jpg>

Figure 10. Exemplary post by US bot police profile of public figures behind bars. In this case, Mark Zuckerberg.

The bot police profiles did receive criticism from other Instagrammers. A user created a profile demanding to stop the user-led bot policing. In their opinion, the bot police were useless, and some bot police officers would use the movement as a fame-enhancing tactic for their own purposes. Some bot police officers would also take their role too seriously, identifying with a “real” police officer. In the bot police officers’ opinion, it would be Instagram’s responsibility to moderate bots effectively, but the platform failed since there were still many bots around in an ever-growing number. This critic also addressed some problematic cases where Instagram would ban innocent accounts after flagging. The criticism included that this was an unacceptable injustice and an essential reason for the bot police to find different ways of taking action. The latter suggestion is interesting because it conveys that the bot police critic did not question the bot police’s existence in the first place but only their way of operating, which the critic requested they change.

Bot policing is a limited form of authenticity governance at a user level, and the platform’s sanctioning actions following flaggings not only serve for “good” but also cause problematic instances. Meta’s co-moderation affects marginalized user groups, as in the case of the censorship of two posts on Facebook by an account that belongs to an US couple who identify as transgender and non-binary. They posted topless photos of themselves with their nipples covered. After users flagged them, the platform’s automated content moderation system reviewed and removed the posts. Meta restored the posts after the couple opposed the censorship decision.[72] The users who flagged the couple’s posts abused the report function to police others’ bodies and self-expression. The platform lacks an effective governance measure to define, standardize, and, on this basis, decide what is inappropriate. This lack facilitates and can lead users to harass, discriminate, and censor particular other user groups and identities.[73] As a reaction to the censorship of the two posts, Meta’s oversight board recommended revising and modifying their community standards concerning adult nudity and sexual activity to “define clear, objective, rights-respecting criteria . . . so that [nudity] is governed by clear criteria that respect international human rights standards.”[74] As I’ve mentioned above, and recent research shows, Meta still lacks a responsible and respectful handling of censored or shadowbanned users.[75]

Conclusion: The Bot Police as Custodians of “Authenticity” on Instagram

This study investigated the unresearched practice of user-led bot policing against botting and porn bots on Instagram. Two case studies showed various strategies for user participation in Instagram’s authenticity governance. Users’ scope of action was limited to flagging and reporting profiles or content. There was no feature for governing “inauthentic” liking or following behavior. The key findings showed that authenticity governance on Instagram is crucial for some users, motivating those who saw botting as moral deviance to become active. The user-led bot policing profiles developed pillorying and coordinated flagging strategies to participate in Instagram’s authenticity governance. They considered themselves necessary to protect “authenticity” and the platform values and perceived themselves as its custodians. Their perspective of “authentic” behavior as “genuine” or “real” behavior does not account for the hybrid and the entangled nature of human and non-human agents in social media environments. The bot police acted autonomously without having authority from the platform or an institutionalized code of conduct to execute their approaches to authenticity governance. Their digital vigilantism potentially caused harm to other Instagrammers. The pursuit of visibility was not only the reason for botting and deploying porn bots but also a strategy used by bot police to establish their own legitimacy and a motivation for their bot-policing activities. However, any individual user engaging in either botting or bot policing had limited agency, and the case studies demonstrated the imbalanced power relations between users and the platform.

In this respect, the findings revealed complex power asymmetries regarding user-led authenticity governance. Instagram is controlled by its parent company, Meta, which pursues its economic interests and is under political-economic pressure from politicians and customers. To avoid responsibility, authenticity governance has been shifted to users. The flagging feature is critical to consider, as it grants limited power and agency to users and enforces mechanisms of peer surveillance and mutual moderation, placing certain users above other users. Without clear instructions, a standardized framework, and training, user-led bot policing is inappropriate to ensure "authentic" behavior on the platform. However, "authenticity" itself is a vague concept and a double-standard marketing term, as "inauthentic" behavior is promoted by algorithmic ranking while simultaneously prohibited by Instagram's community guidelines. A bot police force empowered by the platform would have to be trained and act by a code of conduct. This form of authenticity governance would, however, be paid labor, which Instagram already abolished in the case of the independent third-party fact-checkers. How the implementation of community notes on Instagram will affect user-led bot policing remains to be seen. As long as Instagram is a privatized capitalist platform, we will have contradictory authenticity governance, prioritizing political-economic interests over user interests and service for a good and safe societal public space. Future research could address the evolving status and governance of "authenticity" in an AI-driven online environment and the implications of advanced AI-run fame-enhancing and porn bots and research the impact of community notes on user-led bot policing practices.

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Mind the Gab: A Racial Rhetorical Criticism of an “Alt-Tech” Complaint Against “Big Tech” Content Moderation

by E. Chebrolu | Digital Platforms and Agency, Issue 14.2 (Fall 2025)

ABSTRACT This article analyzes the role of race in the branding rhetoric of the "free speech software company" Gab AI Inc. as found in the X/Twitter and blog posts promoting its products. This analysis aims to assess conservative anxieties about content moderation which drive the creation of alternative social media platforms like Gab. The article argues that the point of stasis, or core set of issues in a debate, in Gab's branding rhetoric between the company and its audience is a shared fantasy of white enslavement/abjection by the content moderation policies of "Big Tech" companies. This point of stasis is extended through three entangled racialized commonplaces: post-racial incorporation of Blackness, nostalgia for settler conquest, and techno-orientalist paranoia. The article analyzes the reciprocal relationship between these commonplaces and the point of stasis in Gab's branding rhetoric and concludes by reflecting on what Gab's aspiration towards white sovereignty in the platform economy entails for contemporary anticolonial and abolitionist praxis and scholarship on content moderation and alternative social media platforms.

KEYWORDS content moderation, critical platform studies, digital rhetoric, psychoanalysis, race

Introduction

The subject of this essay is the branding rhetoric of Gab AI Incorporated, a self-described “free speech software company.”[1] Gab AI’s mission is to “protect free expression, decentralize the web, and democratize access to information for all people, everywhere,” in accordance with the spirit of the First Amendment.[2] The company's primary product is Gab Social, a micro-blogging platform referred to by detractors as Twitter-for-racists, an insult no longer relevant given changes to X/Twitter content moderation policies and practices.[3] Gab was the first of a wave of "alt-tech" free speech-oriented platforms like Parler and Bitchute promising an alternative to "Big Tech" platforms such as Meta's Facebook.[4] Gab's complaint against "Big Tech" is a populist cliché adapted to the platform economy: content moderation on social media platforms unjustly censors The People's constitutionally sanctified free speech.[5] As Ryan Kor-Sins argues, Gab's "platform branding," or how Gab "display[s] a holistic brand through their distinct contextual, linguistic, and technological features," is "entirely contingent on its positioning as an ally of alt-right and far-right groups, emerging as a reaction to a perceived threat of free speech on social media and working to show displaced alt-right users that they are both welcomed and 'exclusive' members on the platform."[6] My concern in this essay is the racialization of this branding, as I argue that Gab not only hosts racist content, but also understands the threat to free speech in racialized terms.

I analyze the branding rhetoric of Gab as an avenue for evaluating conservative anxieties about content moderation as an issue of white agency/sovereignty in the platform economy. Such anxieties have driven the creation of multiple "alt-tech" platforms and the takeover of a prominent mainstream platform (X/Twitter).[7] Drawing from critical race and ethnic studies, psychoanalysis, and rhetorical theory to engage critical platform studies, I evaluate how the rhetoric used to express anxiety over content moderation is mediated by race as a technology for imagining and making sense of user agency in the contemporary platform economy.[8] Though the user as "a normative figure of subjective agency" is often implicitly assumed to be white as a "default setting for tech development," Gab's branding rhetoric is uniquely situated for analysis because the company must make the racialization of user agency explicit in order to generate socioeconomic value.[9] While Gab's appeal is that it is an independent infrastructure not subject to advertiser expectations, shareholders, or other platform's content moderation policies (given independent servers, payment processors, etc.), sustaining such isolation from the broader platform economy cuts off typical routes for generating revenue (advertising, selling information, and speculative capital).[10] The company must convince its rogues gallery of the de-platformed to not only continue using the platform, but also potentially pay for subscriptions for “premium” features. This is a haphazard balancing act: while Gab must moderate because all “platforms must moderate, but disavow it” (such as Gab’s acquiescence to law enforcement, which it has in common with mainstream platforms), Gab must also show that its First Amendment-committed moderation is the best solution.[11] Gab’s branding must therefore provide an affectively compelling explanation of the workings and futures of platforms to keep users affectively/financially invested. As such, the perceived value of the platform to potential users depends on effective use of racial rhetoric to weave a collective racialized sociotechnical imaginary, or a shared fantasy of the value and development of technology shaped by symbolic and material racial violence.[12]

To unravel this imaginary, I perform a racial rhetorical criticism of Gab’s branding rhetoric through blog posts by CEO Andrew Torba on Gab News and posts on Gab AI Inc.’s now defunct Twitter account @getonGab. The Gab News blog posts advocate for Gab’s necessity through commentary and interpretation of news stories about the technology industry, while the X/Twitter account is built around a command (get on Gab) to potential patrons of the platform. The goal of this article is to evaluate the racialized worldview that justifies such a command. I identify the point of stasis, a rhetorical concept naming the common ground or central point of contention in a debate or broader deliberative discourse about a topic, that Gab stakes as common ground with their potential audience. I then analyze the argumentative commonplaces tied to this point of stasis to analyze the racial temporality of Gab’s branding, or how Gab’s rhetoric renders the past, present, and future through a racialized sociotechnical imaginary of the platform economy.

My central claim is that Gab appeals to users through fantasies of white abjection, or essentially imagined narratives in which white people are portrayed as oppressed victims thrust out of the social realm. Such fantasies sustain the desire for free speech through attachment to the figure of the white-user-in-chains as the subject who suffers from enslavement to Big Tech. The threat of white enslavement functions as a point of stasis, a rhetorical concept for evaluating the core issues in a debate which I read in this essay as "a symptom that might tell us something about the affective connections between audience and rhetor and the economy of desire that sustains them."[13] This point of stasis knots together three racialized argumentative commonplaces in Gab's appeals which sustain an economy of desire sustained through racial anxieties about content moderation: post-racial incorporation of Black users, settler nostalgia for the Wild West Internet, and techno-orientalist paranoia about Asian technology industries. These commonplaces articulate, respectively, the present (surveillance and punishment), past (digital freedom/sovereignty), and future (platform despotism) of white abjection. Each commonplace contributes to a racialized sociotechnical imaginary that shapes the desire for platformed freedom/agency through an attachment to white racial sovereignty as the promise of an escape from mediation made sensible through the symbolic positioning of Blackness as non-communicability.[14] The essay proceeds in three further sections: first, I articulate a psychoanalytic racial rhetorical approach to stasis and commonplaces, then analyze the commonplaces in Gab's branding rhetoric, and conclude with remarks about the significance of Gab for the question of engagement with social media platforms.

Racial Fantasies Between Stasis and Commonplace

White Abjection as Point of Stasis

In this section, I argue that white abjection is a shared fantasy that operates as a point of stasis between Gab and its audience. I rely on stasis as a conceptual tool for rhetorical criticism (the analysis of public discourse and argumentation), whereas classic stasis theory aims at guiding speakers through inventing arguments. From Hermagoras through Cicero, stasis operates as a guide for rhetors to aid in the identification of core issues in a debate to establish common ground from which disagreement begins.[15] For example, in a debate about climate change, if the speaker's opponent accepts that climate change is happening *but* claims it is not caused by fossil fuels, the speaker could deploy stasis theory to guide them to arguments about the defining characteristics of climate change. However, stasis takes on a different role for the rhetorical critic analyzing public discourse compared to the rhetor composing a public speech. As a critic, I retroactively derive emergent points of stasis around which public argumentation revolves, curating fragments of the deliberative process structured by power that evidence racialized affective attachment to the core issue(s) of disagreement.[16] I evaluate Gab's appeals through the concept of stasis to apprehend what orients public deliberation over the contemporary platform economy. To generate value, Gab's complaint must be situated in a vision of what it means to exist as a (presumably white conservative) user in the often confusing and opaque complexities of the contemporary platform economy/ecology. The complaint is both singular as exaggerated branding but also necessarily draws from the same racialized commonsense that permeates mainstream deliberation about the future of technology. The core issues and arguments of Gab's rhetoric offers one (strange yet exceedingly familiar) avenue through which to unpack the hullaballoo regarding content moderation.

My approach is informed by two recent interventions regarding stasis in rhetorical scholarship; the first proposes that Blackness is the constitutive outside to public debate and the second attends to the affective investments through which audiences determine what matters. Turning to the first, Amber Kelsie problematizes the understanding of stasis "as a hermeneutic for coming to consensus on the point of contention from which debate proceeds" by theorizing Blackness as the "(im)possible outside" of debate.[17] If agonistic contestation in the arena of words is posed as the common ground of liberal democracy, Kelsie claims that Blackness is a disavowed negativity against which that common ground is formed, either thrust outside of the question of debate or incorporated through terms of order that seek to police and prohibit modes of Black expression that question such terms.

Kelsie argues that "the somewhat paradoxical relationship between consensus and dissensus found in stasis speaks to a kind of disavowal of ungroundedness" and that "refusing this disavowal of groundlessness as it emerges in contemporary figurations of agonistic debate might enable us to more accurately think of rhetoric in its modern inflection as the presupposition of a ground as a war against its own void via anti-Blackness."[18] For Kelsie, W. E. B. Du Bois's account of the Civil War and Reconstruction illustrates the groundlessness of Blackness: "black liberation was never the terms on which the war was fought," as the stasis found between North and South was over "competing concerns to limit the competition that black people posted to whites, both as slave labor and as free labor."[19] But "the waging of the General Strike" by slaves during the US Civil War functioned as "an incisive refusal to continue under the terms presented" which forced the hand of the North and broke Southern logistics, functionally resolving the war from *outside* civil society.[20] Kelsie further reads the failures of Reconstruction, the compromises and common ground found between the North and South, as the re-elaboration of “black suffering through nominal emancipation;” “the resolution to war” established stasis through the effacement of Black liberation and mutation of Black subjection.[21]

The core issues of debate over content moderation are thus linked to this positioning of Blackness in/against public discourse. Stasis is not a simple question of core issues, as the possibility of agonistic democratic debate is rendered coherent by anti-Blackness, And as Ruha Benjamin indicates, when it comes to deliberation over the future of digital technology, “antiblack racism . . . is not only a by-product, but a precondition for the fabrication of such technologies—antiblack imagination put to work.”[22] The emergent points of stasis in deliberation over the past, present, and future of the platform economy are—drawing on Benjamin and Tressie McMillan Cottom—entangled with a concurrent disavowal (through coded bias and imagined objectivity), expropriation (such as extraction of data), and incorporation (like predatory inclusion) of Blackness and Black users.[23] While one of the core issues of content moderation discourse in the United States (which is already to bracket the shifting international legal terrain US-based companies actively shape) is the arbitrary platform governance that fills in the gap between Section 230 and the First Amendment, Gab’s rhetoric instead relies on the gap between the initial promise of social media platforms and the violent processes of racial capitalism generative of value in the platform economy.[24] Gab’s branding appeals to the potential user’s desire for the preservation of personhood/speech rights through a fantasy of platformed freedom/agency that apprehends and narrates the happenings of content moderation on a terrain of argumentation already shaped by racial violence.

Gab’s complaint is therefore not just tied to the racist speech they wish to protect, but also the imposition of terms of order that prevent Black liberation and sustain the violence of racial platform capitalism. This requires a re-reading of the role of the First Amendment in debates about content moderation as a site for “the failures of Reconstruction” that Saidiya Hartman suggests “need to be located to the very language of persons, rights, and liberties."[25] When situating Gab within Reconstruction's failures, the first place to start might be the first Ku Klux Klan represents the failures of Reconstruction as disgruntled Confederate veterans who paved the road to Jim Crow segregation through the violent suppression of Black political representation.[26] In that vein, Gab offers those who take up the first KKK's mission a technological bunker. But to follow Hartman more closely, the concept of liberal individualist personhood enshrined in the possession of the right to speech sanctifies enactments the symbolic violence of everyday racist speech, actively disarticulates the ground for collective liberation in political imagination by reducing it to individual expression and representation, and enacts surveillance of those deemed threats to democratic deliberation/national security. This is neither to discredit the tactical use of First Amendment rights, as with public protest, nor to advocate for expanded hate speech related legislation, but rather to highlight how the concept of personhood embedded in the First Amendment sustains the failures of Reconstruction. The fantasy of freedom through which stasis is achieved must be approached as built on a consecration of racial violence through both racist speech and economic/political order.

My approach to analyzing attachment to this shared fantasy is also informed by Calum Matheson's argument that affective investments in broader economies of desire are the "condition of possibility" for stasis.[27] Stasis does not just bind debaters through the common ground, but is "determined retroactively as a point of organization negotiated by . . . an audience that determines what matters."[28] That determination is bound to the weave of desire and language that makes an issue something that one puts energy and care into in the first place. In Gab's branding, the defense of free speech against content moderation operates as "the *krinomenon* [key issue] that stands in for a lack of agreement between two sides."[29] Free speech thus "makes up for an absence" between the divergent interests of Gab's CEO Torba and Gab's audiences (for example, between ostensibly color-blind Christian nationalism and explicit white nationalism).[30] Matheson utilizes this psychoanalytic inflection of stasis to explain how paranoid conspiracy theorists like QAnon adherents might find common cause with Donald Trump.[31] While Qanon believers and Trump might not share the same unconscious investments, they are attached through points of stasis established through signifiers such as "'Make America Great Again,' 'Drain the Swamp,' [and] even the public persona of Trump himself."[32] Another example are Christian evangelicals who are at odds with Trump's vulgarity and lack of Christian piety but find common ground via the promise of MAGA and his reworking of the Supreme Court. Matheson's psychoanalytic approach offers attention to how racial anxieties engendered by audiences' collective imagination of content moderation could function as a condition of possibility for finding common ground with Gab's appeals.

My approach thus prioritizes the racialized affective attachments that are the condition of possibility for stasis as a shared fantasy that compels the user's desire for using the platform. I draw on Jacques Lacan's formulation of fantasy as an imagined narrativization of desire maintained by attachment to the object a, the object-cause of desire that supports the promise of agency in fantasy.[33] Gab's branding relies on free speech (which could be framed as an iteration of the drive object of *voice*) as the object a: *if only users were able to obtain (white) free speech, then they would be able to access the true pleasures and joys platforms promise*.[34] However, this does not account for the figure of the white man positioned within Gab's branding rhetoric as broken, derelict, functionally thrust out of the social order. Departing from Lacan and building on analysis of how white masculinity fantasizes about its own abjection to maintain hegemony, I claim the fantasy built through the argumentative fragments in Gab's branding constitutes an imagined relation between the platform user and free speech sutured together by the abject figure of the white-man-in chains.[35]

The fantasy of abjection is not free floating as Gab's branding rhetoric is reliant on an analogy between whiteness and racial slavery which equivocates white men's imagined abjection to the structurally enforced abjection of anti-Blackness. The threat of content moderation for Gab and its audiences is theft of the white man's freedom/personhood—a reduction to nothingness, a lack of voice and recognition, a social death in which one's speech is not legible or valid in public discourse. Drawing from Frank Wilderson's critique of the "ruse of analogy," I am suggesting that Gab's rhetoric relies upon a parasitic analogization between racial slavery and the suffering white men are imagined as experiencing at the hands of "Big Tech" in which the threat of content moderation becomes the fantasized inverse of what Kelsie articulates, as whiteness is imagined to be thrust outside of the realm of democratic possibility.[36] Racial slavery is rendered a referent for how white men experience the loosening of content moderation from the bounds of constitutionally sanctioned rights; not just hyperbole, but analogy only made coherent via persistent racial violence. For Gab, the key issue in the debate about content moderation isn't AI, labor, or specific policies/enforcement. Instead, a core anxiety Gab's rhetoric cannot help but return to is a shared fantasy of white enslavement to Big Tech.

The anxiety over free speech in Gab's rhetoric is tied to the impossibility for whiteness to escape its origin and entrapment in symbolic mediation and racial violence. Following Kalpana Seshadri, whiteness is an object of desire that promises sovereign humanness that can overcome and escape mediation.[37] Attachment to whiteness requires disavowal of its historicity, i.e. the history and ongoing processes of structural racial violence that produces whiteness as a signifier invested with meaning.[38] In Gab's branding, crises of free speech cut off access to a promised sovereignty by denying the possibility to publicly perform/enact, celebrate, and value white agency through speech. Racial anxiety undergirds the command "get on Gab:" "*get on Gab or be a slave*." The logic embedded in this command is critical to the platform's ethos, or the character/credibility offered to audiences by the rhetor, built through the repetition of this command to the imagined user of Gab. Gab establishes common ground with its potential user base by positioning itself as the only available digital protection against the enslavement of white life to the fact of content moderation.

In the next section, I outline how this established common ground is reaffirmed and extended through the branding rhetoric of Gab.

Racialized Commonplaces in Branding Rhetoric

In this section, I argue that the point of stasis Gab establishes with its audience is generative of and reinforced by racialized arguments made throughout its branding rhetoric. The arguments made throughout Gab's branding rhetoric build out and concretize the shared fantasy imperiled (white) platformed agency into a broader sociotechnical imaginary. The three patterns of racialized argumentation that I attend to in my analysis work as different mechanisms by which white abjection is elaborated upon. The *post-racial incorporation of Blackness* articulates the present of white abjection through content moderation, the *nostalgia for settler conquest* recalls a past of white freedom/digital sovereignty, and *techno-orientalist paranoia* projects an encroaching future of white enslavement to foreign power. The infrastructures of racial violence and historical contingencies from which these patterns of argumentation arise are distinct yet entangled, and in Gab's branding rhetoric, these commonplaces both come together around and extend the fantasies of white abjection that provide Gab and its audiences a point of stasis.

Such racialized argumentation is littered throughout Gab's X/Twitter posts and Gab News posts written by CEO Andrew Torba. From two snapshots of the X/Twitter account, I combed through 3,477 posts in total (made up of 1,568 retweets, 788 replies, 1,122 tweets) between December 4, 2018 through May 18, 2019 and July 29, 2019 through August 6, 2019 (Gab has since deleted their X/Twitter account). For the Gab News posts (on news.gab.com) I closely read 194 Gab News posts written by Andrew Torba (the CEO) from May 28, 2019 through February 24, 2024. I focused on posts written by Torba given that he is acting as a representative of the company, which is not the case for other blog writers. The corpus constructed between these two forms of branding is representative of how Gab makes appeals to users to come to the platform and rationalizes staying on the platform. As Donovan, Lewis, and Friedberg argue, both the acts of coming to and staying on Gab are influenced by the practical necessity for a technical infrastructure hospitable to white nationalists after increased content moderation following the 2017 Unite the Right Rally, which indicates that Gab has to convince users that such an infrastructure *is* a solution.[39] My analysis focuses on the logic underlying how the platform portrays itself through X/Twitter and Gab News posts as a symptom of anxieties about content moderation rather than an empirical analysis of audience reception of marketing.

To demonstrate how I approach analysis, I'll use two tweets here in which the fantasy of white abjection is made explicit. The first references psychological enslavement: "Freedom on the internet is being crushed, to the applause of the elites and to the sheep who are mindlessly enslaved to them."[40] In Gab's rendering of content moderation, enslavement takes the shape of mind control by elites who manipulate a chunk of the masses into desiring unfreedom. The second poses content moderation as an attack on ownership of the self: "Tommy Robison [British white nationalist] is the latest to be 'unpersoned' from the internet. This should horrify everyone. If they can do it to Alex Jones, to Gab, and to Tommy Robinson, they can do it to you. It's time to break free from the chains of Silicon Valley"[41] "Unpersoned" is a reference to George Orwell's *1984* in which an authoritarian state wipes somebody from existence for ideological disagreement. This invocation figures Silicon Valley platform governance as an authoritarian state. But unpersoning must be read alongside the metaphor of breaking free of Silicon Valley's chains—Gab's rhetoric portrays the present as a dystopiain which social media platforms have shackled white men, bending them to the will of the elites. Breaking free from chains is a repeated refrain.[42] Content moderation is figured here as a form of social death, an excision from civil society by means of barring one from a right to digital mediation.

Gab's branding extends this fantasy of white abjection as a symptomatic site of the production and perpetuation of racial commonsense. While for economists, brands "are simply a form of information" about commodities on offer, they are also, as Douglas Holt argues, "ideological parasites" that become "powerful cultural symbols" as "because commodities materialize myths . . . allowing people to interact around these otherwise ephemeral and experientially distant myths in everyday life."[43] Following Dennis Mumby, "branding practices" incorporate "particular instantiations of the politics of common sense . . . reflecting particular practices of inclusion and exclusion."[44] This commonsense is woven through, drawing on Sarah Banet-Weiser, how Gab tells a story about content moderation to its customers through "the series of images, themes, morals, values, feelings, and sense of authenticity" that frame the platform's mission as "promise as much as a practicality."[45] And similarly to the neoliberal multicultural marketing that co-opts the rhetoric of intersectionality and Black social justice movements analyzed by Frances Sobande, Banet-Weiser, and Zoe Glatt that Gab is attempting to brand itself as different from, Gab's branding draws upon racial common sense built through the racialized mythology of American history/life.[46] Gab's racialized sociotechnical imaginary draws upon this mythos to suture gaps between the user, the promise of agency, and the complexities, violence, and material infrastructure of a global platform economy, or as Dalia Gebrial names it, "racial platform capitalism."[47]

Gab's attempts to distinguish itself from competition by rhetorically harnessing racial common sense are necessary given that Gab has little more to offer. Gab has no unique features except for its content moderation policy and isolated infrastructure. The main sources of revenue for Gab are "donations, crowdfunding, and payments for premium subscriptions."[48] While premium subscriptions allow access to a few extra features, such as larger video uploads, a central motivation for subscription is the last feature listed in the description of Gab PRO: "Fighting against Silicon Valley tyranny."[49] Whereas platforms like Facebook have unique features and network effects to draw in new users not invested in a vague mission to “help people connect,” belief in Gab’s mission drives its value.[50] This is particularly true since Gab forked the open-source, federated platform Mastodon; there’s little difference between spinning up a Mastodon server versus a Gab server other than the branding. There is no *unique* set of features that would compel a user to “get on Gab;” there is just Gab’s promise of the defense of (the white man’s) free speech expressed through racial common sense.

This racial common sense is expressed in racialized commonplaces. The arguments implied or made explicit in Gab’s posts congeal into and emerge from what rhetoricians call “topoi” or “commonplaces.” The concept originates in Aristotle’s topoi, or abstract guiding principles that act as “machines for making premises” (in goes a topic, out comes a premise).[51] The concept has shifted reference pointsover time, as with commonplace books that worked as “linguistic storehouses” that “included quotations, examples, parallels, synonyms, epithets, aphorisms, and various trope and figures to be inserted into one’s own work.”[52] Commonplaces could be seen as anything that aids in the invention of rhetoric; however, for the purpose of this essay, I take a narrow view of the racialized commonplace as specific lines and patterns of racialized argumentation that emerge in public discourse/debate.

Stasis and commonplaces have a reciprocal relationship. Commonplaces participate in the economy of desire that conditions attachment to core issues around which a discourse coheres by extending and sustaining fantasy relations to the issues, and concurrently, stasis is generative of commonplaces. In prescriptive stasis theory, identifying stasis directs the rhetor to relevant commonplaces. As Michael Hoppman writes, “most classical stasis models provide a specialized set of topoi . . . which guide the accuser in his or the defending in her search for applicable arguments.”[53] For example, if the point of stasis is the question of commitment, i.e. “did the person commit the act,” arguments could draw from commonplaces about signs the person committed the act, the motivation for committing the act, or suspicious behavior before, during, or after the alleged act.[54] While classical models guide inferences in composition and posit a one-way street (stasis → commonplace), I focus on the reciprocity between stasis and commonplaces (stasis ↔ commonplace). I trace the racialized topology (recalling both topoi and Lacan's turn to topology) through which commonplaces used in making arguments for user agency are knotted together through the figure of the white-user-in-chains.[55]

My method for identifying commonplaces is dependent on my judgment of what significant patterns emerge through the rhetorical fragments littered through @getonGab's feed and Torba's posts on Gab News. The posts I curate exemplify patterns of argumentation that draw from racialized tropes and figures rather than other topics, such as references to Bitcoin as "free speech money."[56] In the next section, my analysis unravels entangled racial rhetorics crystallized into a constellation of commonplaces that loop back to the stasis point of white enslavement while also flexibly extending this racial fantasy into a broader racialized sociotechnical imaginary. I do not presume the rhetorical fragments I've gathered are a representative sample of Gab's overall racialized argumentation. For example, I do not directly address antisemitic rhetoric in this article, which is a critical part of Gab's branding that is relatively subdued in the X/Twitter posts and blog posts I collected. While I have previously addressed how white nationalist antisemitic fantasies of a crisis in free speech are used to make sense of digital platforms, in this essay, I focus on the three aforementioned patterns of argumentation to draw out the touchstones of racial commonsense Gab's rhetoric shares with the "mainstream" of US-based public discourse on political issues related to the platform economy.[57] As is demonstrated in the next section, race is used as a symbolic resource in argumentation throughout Gab's branding, extending and amplifying anxieties over the potential barring of white voices from the platform economy.

The Racial Topology of Gab's Complaint

Post-Racial Incorporation of Blackness

The first commonplace is the post-racial incorporation of Blackness, in which Gab portrayed itself as post-racial through the tokenization of Black conservatives and equivalences between anti-Blackness and content moderation. By "post-racial," I mean racial rhetoric shaped by the premise that a given nation (or the world more generally) has overcome racism.[58] The mythos of post-racialism posits that race has become a neutral signifier of difference, institutional/structural racism is overcome and therefore irrelevant/nonexistent, and speaking of racism is divisive/irrational as racism has been contained to the individual extreme hatreds of a few.[59] Consider the following retweet: "In the future society will look back on the Big Tech companies censoring conservatives for posting 'hate speech' (facts, opinions, or jokes that don't align with the liberal establishment) the same way we look back on those who refused service to Black people in restaurants."[60] Not only has anti-Blackness been contained as a past artifact of Jim Crow segregation, contemporary content moderation of anti-Black speech is equated to segregation. The post-racial is symbolically doubled; not only has racism been overcome, but it has been overcome to the point that moderating racist content is *like* segregation.

Gab engages in post-racial rhetoric to differentiate its value from mainstream social media platforms, as in a blog post titled "Gab Doesn't Have a Diversity Officer and We Never Will" in which Torba poses a contrast between Gab and Facebook, which had just "elevated" the role of chief diversity officer Maxine Williams in the company after the 2020 uprisings.[61] For Torba, "diversity officers aren't ever concerned with or focused on diversity of thought, diversity of ideas, or diversity of beliefs," but are instead concerned with "filling job positions . . .

based on the color of someone’s skin,” which should be seen as “inherently racist” rather than “endorsed, praised, and embraced.”[62] In contrast, Gab is a platform where race has no bearing in decision making, as “the color of someone’s skin doesn’t have anything to do with defending our mission of empowering everyone to speak freely online.”[63] The free speech platform is posed as the true medium of “diversity of thought and the growth of new ideas.”[64] Gab’s post-racial rhetoric diverges from its white nationalist audience because it is courting a broader conservative audience by embracing the commonsense of post-Civil Rights conservative racial rhetoric.

Gab’s branding also uses content moderation and free speech to figure a shared condition of victimization between white and Black social media users. An example Gab frequently drew upon in 2019 was Black conservative influencer Candace Owens, who is used to suggest that content moderation policy has gone too far, as in the retweet about how “@YouTube has restricted the latest episode of The Candace Owens Show. Two Black people discussing the issues facing the Black community is something young people are supposed to be protected from? Why would YouTube put this in restricted mode?”[65] The moderation of Owens’s content, which often utilizes common anti-Black discussions of policy such as “claiming that liberal policies incentivizes fatherless homes,” is posed as a case of extremity: *even* a Black conservative saying the things that white conservatives say about Black people has been moderated, which poses this moderation as a form of generalized discrimination against conservatives.[66] Gab uses the moderation of Black conservatives, as in another retweet about how the removal of Antonia Okafor from YouTube’s Partner Program was an example of “Social Media Giants . . . silencing anyone who doesn’t fully buy into their leftist bullshit,” to create content moderation as a universalized problem.[67]

On the other end, Gab has posted and retweeted stories about Facebook moderating the content of Black activists speaking about anti-Blackness. Two such headlines are “Facebook While Black: Users Call It Getting ‘Zucked,’ Say

Talking About Racism Is as Censored as Hate Speech" and "Facebook Admits It Often Confuses Advocacy and Commentary on Racism and White Complicity In Anti-Blackness with Attacks on a Protected Group."[68] In the context of Gab's feed, such posting creates an equivalence between conservatives facing moderation for anti-Black comments and Black people who speak against anti-Blackness. The problem with Black Facebook users' moderation is not the specific targeted content or why it was targeted, but the fact of moderation itself. Gab thus relies on anti-Black violence to market itself not only as a bunker for anti-Black jouissance, but through post-racial incorporation of Blackness as proof of the white man's abject condition: *we are treated the same as you*.

Gab's post-racial rhetoric depends on tokenism, strategically highlighting and emphasizing the existence of Black users as proof of the platform's innate post-racial constitution. Tokenism is "one strategy by which texts authorize people whose difference . . . if politicized and collectively articulated might pose a threat to a dominant order in which some groups are kept subordinate to others."[69] Gab's tokenism "glorifies the exception" by highlighting Black Gab users to obscure the platform's broader promise of functioning in the platform economy as a digital safe space for Nazis.[70] In one blog post, Torba attempts to refute New York Times reporting that "referred to Gab as a 'haven for racist memes and content'" by referencing a Gab post featuring a Black woman taking a selfie who identifies as a "Christian Trumplican in a Blue State" who is "done with FB and Twitter censoring my POTUS!"[71] Torba claims that "at the time of publication" that post was "one of the top trending posts"; a Black woman's selfie here "metonymically represents a larger cultural grouping" as a token exchanged within discourse about content moderation.[72] There is no further argument from Torba about the extent to which there is a Black user base, as a single trending post is held as proof that there is no racism on Gab.

Gab also tokenizes by strategically highlighting the incorporation of Black members of the Republican Party as a refutation of the charge of racism. In a blog post, Torba welcomes Allen West, then-chairman of the Texas GOP, to Gab "just days after liberal subversives who have invaded the Texas GOP voted in favor of deplatforming themselves from Gab."[73] The post came after the rejection of Gab as antisemitic by Texas Governor Greg Abbot. In the context of this intra-Texas GOP squabble regarding platforms for their membership, Torba's post strategically poses West's first Gab post about "the demon of critical race theory that is infecting our schools, culture, and government" as indication that Abbott is incorrect in rejecting Gab.[74] In another blog post, Torba republishes an op-ed written by Gab user and Pennsylvania Republican politician Kathy Barnette.[75] In the op-ed, Barnette mobilizes a Frederick Douglass quote about the struggle for freedom to justify narratives of white victimization, such as highlighting a story of "a young white man . . . being taunted and recorded by a Black man."[76] While Torba has also welcomed members of Congress such as Paul Gosar and Matt Gaetz in specific Gab News posts, West and Barnette are the only figures who a) get their own posts despite not having been elected to a major political position and b) have republished writing in which they denounce anti-racist rhetoric. It appears that the ticket to being valorized by Gab for Black conservative politicians is rhetoric accepting the victimization/abjection of white men as a central issue in political discourse. Post-racial incorporation functions by figuring the present through a comparison that either creates an equivalence between anti-Blackness and white abjection or through tokenization of Black users who affirm Gab's views.

Nostalgia for Conquest

Next, Gab uses the language of conquest to articulate a nostalgic attachment to the lost past of the free Internet, with evocation of conquest meant to save white men from their abjection and enslavement by Big Tech. In assuming the role of preserving the First Amendment of the Constitution, Gab's complaint figures what it takes to seize freedom through what Tiffany Lethabo King calls "conquistador humanism," or "the crafting and sustaining of European human life and self-actualization through Black and Indigenous death."[77] Gab imagines platformed agency and self-actualization through the fantasy of conquest (now reenacted on "cyberspace"). To be clear, I am not analogizing Gab's aims with the aims of past settlers on the basis that "cyberspace" is land to be conquered just like the Americas. Rather, the fantasy of digital space *as space,* as a site for property/sovereignty, depends on a cartographic fantasy that erupts as both a salve and a production of "the anxiety produced by the tenuous and always incomplete project of conquest."[78]

For example, in a Gab News post titled "It's Time to Burn the Ships of Traditional Media," Torba makes the case for embracing alternative media platforms by viewing the lesson of Tucker Carlson's departure from Fox News through the metaphor of "burning the ships."[79] The metaphor is derived directly from the story of "Spanish conquistador Hernan Cortes" arriving "in the New World with a mission to conquer the Aztec Empire."[80] Torba describes how Cortes "eliminated any possibility of retreat and forced his men to fight for victory or death" by burning the ships of men who "were afraid" and "not sure that they could succeed in their mission."[81] For Torba, "this act of burning the ships became a symbol of determination and commitment."[82] Torba produces Gab's ethos through symbolic orientation: turning away from return to the Old World and towards the genocidal violence of conquering the New World. The turning toward embraces the grit and determination of the conquistador whose violence produces the digital sovereignty that Gab's branding must symbolically produce as lost to create Gab's value.

Traditional media is the path to the decaying Old World that the Gab user is cutting off through the act of getting on Gab. To get on Gab is to rekindle the fire of a conquistador subjectivity that can conquer "a new media landscape, one that is more decentralized and less reliant on traditional media outlets."[83] Having the "courage, determination, and willingness" to "read independent blogs, watch independent news channels, use independent platforms, and listen to independent podcasts" is how the newly made conquistador can "take an active role in seeking the truth" and "creat[ing] a better future for ourselves."[84] The branding rhetoric pulls sleights of hand throughout this post, as mediation is figured as sovereignty as platforms become *terra nullius*, the fiction Jodi Byrd describes as the "paradigmatic uninscribed, uninhabited earth" that works as a "convenient colonial construct that maintained lands were empty of meaning, of language, of presence, and of history before the arrival of the European."[85] The future Gab heralds is uncharted territory in which the search for the truth can inscribe meaning and presence by figuring the production/maintenance of technical infrastructure as seizure of a space for white sovereignty.

The language of conquest was central in the roll out of Dissenter, which began as a browser extension for creating a comment section on any web page and eventually became a web browser with said extension after being banned from Google Chrome and Firefox. Dissenter's goal is to get around corporate news media moderation of the comment section—being able to comment conservative platitudes is the freedom Dissenter offers. Dissenter's branding drew upon the idea of "the Wild West Internet," in which Gab is imagined as rejuvenating a pioneer ethos following the fall of the Internet: "Gab is a perfect example of doing something to fix a problem. They're the real Americans who, 'Go West' and make their fortune, only now the west is 'Cyberspace, where they're staking out their future."[86] Overcoming content moderation is figured as preserving something essential to the American spirit, a self-actualization found through an entrepreneurial conquest of space. Dissenter thus returns the Internet and user to a prior state: "#Dissenter brings the wild west back to the internet. The way it was meant to be. It's absolutely glorious." Another tweet states "The wild west internet is back, and there's absolutely nothing Silicon Valley can do about it."[87] Silicon Valley is figured as a barrier to such a return, in the classic set up of the nostalgic fantasy of recuperating loss: *if only [x] didn't take it away, [y] would be mine as it used to be when things were good*. "The internet was always the wild west. Then

Silicon Valley changed that. Not anymore."[88] The fantasy of past conquest renewed, of a heroic return to the processes of US military forces and settlers conquering the American West in the name of empire, resolves and overcomes the gap between mediation and sovereignty, such that a conquistador subjectivity is imagined to be enacted via the protected digital mediation Gab provides.

Nostalgia for the Wild West Internet shapes how Gab and its users imagine the development of the contemporary platform economy from the position of the user. One retweeted post reads: "@getongab This has always been a concern of mine. The Internet was originally conceived to be an endless digital frontier where everyone could carve out their own little corner. But with the globalization of the technology, it's becoming a walled in digital Disney World."[89] Consider how the Internet is mythologized here. After the West, after the Pacific, after space, we come to the Internet as a frontier that unfolds with no end. What is lost with "globalization" (here meaning the supposed expansion of platforms to, presumably, the non-white world of the Global South) is the freedom of a place of one's own found in an infinite playground of conquest now enclosed by the corporation. Competition between tech companies is thus imagined through American history: "There's a very clear civil war for the internet now happening at the browser extension level. On the one hand: Dissenter brings back freedom and the wild west internet. On the other: Jigsaw and NewsGuard create a corporate safe space where elites control the narrative."[90] Jigsaw, an independent subsidiary of Google, had put out Tune, a browser extension "meant to make our online browsing experience a little bit nicer by freeing it of toxic comments," and NewsGuard is a browser extension that provides "reliability ratings for news and information sources to help users make decisions about which news sources to trust—and avoid misinformation and disinformation."[91] To portray competition between Tune, NewsGuard, and Dissenter as a civil war does not replay the clash of South and North, but rather rhetorically juxtaposes the mythic spirit of the US West to the anxious decadence of coastal corporate elites. The debate over content moderation is imagined as between the unleashed freedom of endless conquest versus the consolidation of power over speech in a decaying elite corporate form. The nostalgic fantasy of renewed conquest solidifies the promise of joy in using Gab to escape control.

Techno-Orientalist Paranoia

The last commonplace is techno-orientalist paranoid fantasies, in which Gab's rhetoric warns potential users of an invasive Asiatic force behind Big Tech entrancing innocent white US citizens through hypnotic technological mind control. Techno-orientalism is "the phenomenon of imagining Asia and Asians in hypo- or hypertechnological terms in cultural productions and political discourse."[92] As a "discursive cultural phenomenon," techno-orientalism associates technology and a fantasized Orient to "reinforce the image of a culture that is cold, impersonal and machine-like, an authoritarian culture lacking emotional connection to the rest of the world."[93] While techno-orientalism scholarship initially focused on discourses about the 1980s Japanese tech industry, Lok Siu and Claire Chun indicate that techno-orientalist discourses now also "provoke fears of a future global market . . . economically driven by Chinese consumptive desires and practices."[94] Similar to how Frantz Fanon framed antisemitic fantasy as positioning Jewish people as subversive racial competitors, familiar yellow peril narratives of insidious Asian influence are run through the site of market competition in the tech industry.[95] Gab's techno-orientalism is particularly paranoid, given thatAsian states are figured as a shadowy force whose trickery/subversion are swallowing up the white user of digital platforms. Paranoia is a structure of fantasy in which "beyond any reason the paranoiac 'knows' that another person, or more abstractly a force, has 'got it in for him.'"[96] In Gab's branding, the white user is unwittingly captured into a digital slavery by authoritarian Asians who cannot understand freedom as the result of racialized loss in market competition, which can be resolved via the user's show of agential capacity in financially backing Gab's fight against an Asiatic Internet.

Gab's paranoid fantasies portray China as a figure of comparison and competition, as in retweets of headlines referencing Chinese content moderation, such as "China blocked Wikipedia in all languages earlier this week."[97] The logic of Gab's comparison melds contemporary US geopolitical competition with China and Russia, Cold War anti-communist propaganda, and a fervent belief in the US as the land of constitutionally-guaranteed free speech: "The four different internets of the coming decade: China: censored, controlled entirely by the state. Russia: censored, controlled mostly by the state. The EU: censored, controlled by unelected globalists. America: free and open, powered by The People."[98] Chinese digital platforms certainly enforce stringent legally regulated content moderation policies, but, following Maximillian Mayer, to read this as a being "purely described through a register of control" ignores the "three-way interplay between party-state, platform companies, and citizen-consumers," such that the narrative of dystopian nightmare that "media reports routinely express when looking at China's digital advancements neither allow for an objective account nor generate productive insights."[99] For example, while TikTok is seen in American discourses as a tool of the Chinese state (or as Torba puts it, "Chinese spyware"), Zongyi Zhang illustrates a nuanced negotiation of power between the state and the platform in which the state intentionally makes "regulatory concessions."[100]

Beyond comparing US-based freedom to Asiatic despotism, Gab's branding figures the Asian despot as a shadowy figure lurking behind Big Tech: "Silicon Valley sold you and your data out to the Chinese and the Saudis."[101] Paranoia, in which "the paranoid person *observes clear signs* that the Other is driven by a malevolent plan, of which he or she as a person is the victim" and mediation "is invaded by a maddening force of which the subject is the mere object," emerges in this discourse in the fantasy of China as behind Silicon Valley.[102] Gab positions the Chinese state as puppet master of American firms by strategically highlighting the transnational operations of transnational corporations, as in retweeted posts about Chinese influence on Google: a post from former Google employee turned Gab-advocate saying "When I arrived, they were pulling out of China because censorship, when I left, they were trying hard to get back in"; a headline about "Google censoring VPN review sites on its China ad platform"; another headline about Google blocking "China adverts for sites that help bypass censorship"; and yet another headline about Google "Conducting a Secret 'Performance Review' of Its Censored China Search Project."[103] When these posts/headlines are put in the context of Gab's broader branding, they signal paranoid anxieties about American-based platform companies attempting bending the knee to the Chinese state.

Paranoid fantasies offer Gab's audience an imagined drive/motivation behind the calculus of Chinese businesses interacting with Western tech markets: "It's the oligarchs of Silicon Valley, the little tyrants who bend over backwards for their Communist Chinese Party masters, against We The People."[104] In one tweet, Gab highlights how "Apps that Tencent (basically the Chinese government) has ownership in: Epic Games (Fortnite)/ Supercell (Clash of Clans and many other top mobile games) / Discord/ Reddit /Snapchat/ TikTok/ Activision Blizzard/ The Chinese have the attention of your children more than you do. Bad!"[105] Anxieties about children and media are not new, but the twist in Gab's story is how Chinese investment is read as infiltration leading to loss of control: "The Chinese government is subverting the United States of America by investing billions and buying up American tech, social media, communications, travel, and gaming services that all of your kids (and you yourself) use daily for hours on end./Why is no one talking about this?"[106] The specifically *paranoid* techno-orientalist fantasy doesn't just utilize Chinese relationships to technology to make sense of Western digital futures, but instead sees Chinese control *as* the future of the Western Internet (if users don't get on Gab). The combination of yellow peril tropes and techno-orientalist discourse appeals to Gab's audience by amplifying anxieties about who is behind big Tech's content moderation.[107]

Gab's paranoia extends to other Asian states, which are similarly figured as shadowy influence subverting American corporations. In the tweet, "Gab-

America/ Apple- China/ Google- China/ Facebook- The EU/ Twitter- Saudi Arabia/ Snapchat- Saudi Arabia/ Don't @ me," Saudi investments in Twitter and Snapchat signal foreign influence by an authoritarian Asian government.[108] A reference to Elon Musk's compliance with "the Turkish government's request to censor political content during their elections" reaffirms Gab's mission to protect the First Amendment: "if the content is legal in the United States it's legal on Gab and it's not being removed. There is absolutely nothing that foreign governments can to do [sic] force an American company to comply with foreign speech laws."[109] In these references to Asian states, Gab's value lies in refusal "to comply with demands from governments," which has apparently "garnered respect and support from individuals who value open discourse and it has become a symbol of resistance against censorship."[110] Torba also expresses anxiety about Asian tech workers, as "American values are foreign to Silicon Valley because three-quarters of Silicon Valley workers are from foreign countries with foreign values. Would American workers unilaterally censor fellow Americans at the behest of a corporation? Perhaps, but there would undoubtably be a few more dissenters and whistleblowers" in an article about how "Gabbers are not just 'users.' They are our shareholders, customers, donors, volunteers, and warriors."[111] The value of the (implicitly white conservative) Gab user to Gab's CEO is rhetorically manifested through differentiation from the Asian tech workers whose "foreign values" threaten white digital sovereignty. These references to Asian tech authoritarianism are drawn together as a foreboding vision of a future Internet. Through this commonplace, Gab portrays the global market as a stage of racial competition, a war of racial survival that Gab is fighting against tyrannical Asiatic platform governance to save the empire from inevitable downfall. And of course, all that a potential Gab user has to do to contribute to this desperate mission to save white free speech from a subversive and shadowy Asiatic horde is exercise their sovereign agency by purchasing a subscription to Gab PRO.

Conclusion

Three scholarly implications arise from my analysis. First, a racial rhetorical approach to the sociotechnical imaginaries through which platforms are figured could prove fruitful when applied without generalization and with close attention to the particularity of contexts outside of US-based platforms. For example, Gab's First Amendment-driven imaginary is not universal; users from the Global South/of the global majority have different coordinates of imagining the goals and uses of platforms often no less detached from the mythos of Western Man given that platforms are situated by discourses of modernization/development.[112] An approach attentive to local/regional/transnational racial rhetorics could avoid automatic declarations of such users' desires as necessarily decolonial or resistive. Second, Gab's follies are what is at stake in ignoring the racialization of capital in scholarship on alternative social media.[113] Alternative social media are not necessarily counterhegemonic because they contest corporate social media, as colorblind/post-racial co-option of anti-capitalist rhetoric is rather easy given the user's assumed default setting as white. Third, otherwise incisive scholarship on content moderation and racism is often limited by aims to make platform governance better as an anti-racist or decolonial first step.[114] But if platform governance is sutured to racial violence and, as Sarah Roberts has shown, commercial content moderation depends on outsourcing to underpaid/exploited workers in the Global South who experience psychic violence from the work, then scholarship might be retooled to aim at practical aid for marginalized users (for example, Palestinian users targeted post-10/7) who must either take up the mantle of volunteer moderator, navigate/combat content moderation policies antagonistic to their occupation of the position of "user," or put activist pressure on platform governance structures.[115]

More practically, it is quite easy to dismiss Gab as a marginal/fringe platform for racist losers, which might lead a reader to suggest that ***of course*** *the way they* *think about free speech is racist, they're literally Nazis*. My response can't be *well actually, Torba's a Christian Nationalist, not a Nazi!* A more appropriate rejoinder might be that the rhetorical moves the company makes are not unique to Gab. I'll offer a few examples: zero-sum competition with China is a core bipartisan tenant of US platform regulation policy deliberation, the frontier myth is regularly referenced in Silicon Valley ideology, and tokenizing Black content creators is a common public relations tactic of large social media corporations. Rather than a complete break from "mainstream" US political discourse about platforms and policy, Gab is an exaggerated amplification of racial commonsense that can resonate with its potential user base precisely because Gab's logic begins from such commonsense about the role and function of media technology (i.e. to preserve white racial sovereignty).

Reading Gab as a symptom of racial anxieties coursing through public discourse in the US is also not advocacy for recentering public discourse to proper points of stasis from which "we" could proceed to an actual debate about the future of content moderation to make for an ethical platform economy. Instead, Gab's relationship to "mainstream" commonsense demonstrates that the company's quixotic pronouncements of itself as an outlaw vanguard heralding a new platform economy could be used as a point of reflection for those mobilizing in various ways against the current situation. Gab's attempts at "resistance" to the status quo is not some kind of false consciousness of the user who must instead be made conscious of the true source of their common exploitation by Big Tech, but instead an active extension of racial logics shaping how the platform economy is made sensible and transparent in public discourse. To put it more bluntly, while Gab has a clear target demographic, the presumption that "we are all enslaved by Big Tech" (or variations that might not use the "enslavement" metaphor explicitly, but aim for a shared notion of suffering as the basis for a kind of consumer revolt against the platform economy) is shared quite widely by those who do not identify as "white conservative men." As such, the hunch I'll offer in lieu of an elegant last sentence is that a minor necessity of the current situation is an amplification and cultivation of rhetorical practices that can dislodge and reroute desires for corporate (or peer-based) recognition/mediation of the user as a figure of collective human sovereignty as such desires emerge in and shape the pathways and avenues of anticolonial and abolitionist organizing and advocacy.

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Digital Agents: The New Politics of Recognition in Contemporary "Post-Race" Fiction

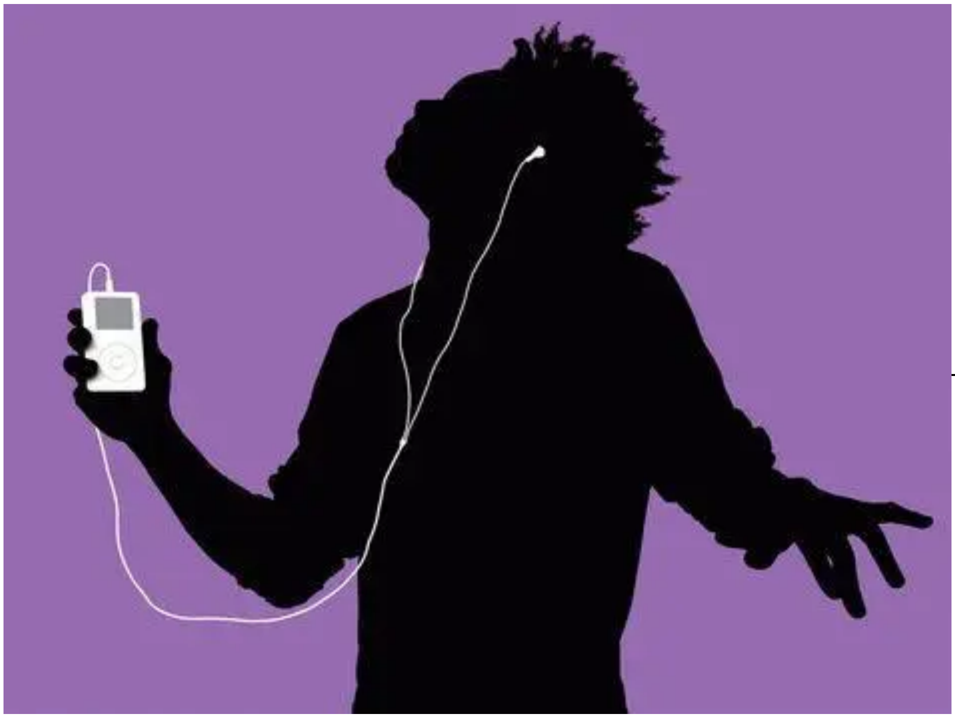
by Maria Shivani Bose | Digital Platforms and Agency, Issue 14.2 (Fall 2025)

ABSTRACT What are the new racial politics of individual agency and collective recognition in a putatively "post-race" era defined, in large part, by platform capitalism's increasingly pervasive technologies for identity management and securitization? This essay begins with Apple's highly publicized 2016 counterterrorism dispute with the FBI and the company's subsequent marketing campaign for facial recognition-based password encryption (Face ID) before turning at length to recent anglophone novels of ethnicity—by Bharati Mukherjee, Mohsin Hamid, and Teju Cole—that lend narrative expansion to the "post-racial" racializing logics that Apple's litigation and campaign materials reveal. A cathexis for Big Tech's identity politics as a whole, Apple's engagement with debates over personal and national security adumbrates an intensified if deeply familiar neoliberal conception of racial individualism implicitly opposed to the coarse, impersonal racial rubrics presumed to operate across security's bureaucratic institutions. Condensed by "the most unforgettable, magical password ever created: your face," security, in Face ID's schema, emerges not as the controversial task of law enforcement but as the innate (read: magical) property of a given subject's racial-identitarian uniqueness, a property whose protections obtain not from the state's overreaching vigilance but rather from the technical sophistication (read: magic) of Apple's biometric sensor, able to sublimate that subject's racial singularity into digital form. Apple thus marks out a "post-racial" racial recognition paradigm cast along two vectors: the first, a highly particularized vector of "post-racial" individualism provisioned by what Alexander Galloway describes as platform capitalism's "new customized micropolitics of identity management," where subjects of all races enjoy the illusion of an expansive political agency; the second, a highly reductive, re-racializing vector that, as Erica Edwards suggests, collapses Black and Brown subjects under post-9/11 rubrics of threat, fear, and terror by data-driven processes of "strategic characterization" and "pattern of life" profiling that progressively transmute individual human agents into digital racial types. Contemporaneous novels of ethnicity pursue versions of that "post-racial" vectorization scheme. Featuring Black and Brown protagonists whose racial identities disappear, mutate, and resurface as they move between shifting, differentiated zones of political inclusion and exclusion, within and across increasingly flexible national borders, and in and out of new technologies of algorithmic governance and visual securitization, novels by Mukherjee, Hamid, and Cole depict in turn race's digital obfuscation and its hypervisibility, its subsumption within tech-intensified neoliberal market logics of individual preference, qualitative uniqueness, and customizability, and its monolithic resurgence at the militarized borders of the nation. Tracing out a literary protocol of "post-racial" race-making that belies these vectors' opposition and foregrounds instead their mutual reinforcement of US empire and global white supremacy, these novels subsequently compel a "post-racial" reading practice in which depth reading—reading for race's ontological invalidity—paradoxically uncovers and renews its mimetic coordinates. At bottom, they profess the digital intensification of what Madhu Dubey calls race's "conceptual instability" in a putatively "post-race" era for which platform capitalism's relentlessly individualizing forms of agential capacity are deployed as compensation for race's biological retrenchment across the range of US empire's global securitization projects.

KEYWORDS Apple, digital agents, platform studies, racial capitalism

In September 2017, less than a year into Donald Trump's first presidential term and just one month before the launch of iPhone X, Apple began releasing short commercials illustrating the phone's signature features: infrared facial-recognition-based password authentication and payment services (Face ID), animated emojis capable of mimicking users' facial expressions (Animojis), studio-quality camera effects for photography and video recording, augmented-reality gaming, wireless charging, and more—all powered by Apple's A11 bionic system-on-chip, proprietary graphics unit, and neural engine. Throwbacks to the diversity campaigns of the mid-eighties and early nineties, the commercials featured attractive multiracial casts among whom non-white subjects received pride of place. Two ads for the Portrait Mode camera effect starred light-skinned Black women, while instructional videos presented a heavily freckled Asian woman and a young Middle Eastern woman dressed in a bright green hijab. A longer ad for Portrait Mode, set to Muhammad Ali's recitation of his 1963 poem "I Am the Greatest," scrolled through a Benetton-esque catalog before closing with the image of a Black woman wearing African tribal face paint and beads. Animoji commercials hyped music by popular Black artists Migos and Childish Gambino as well as South Korean indie pop band HYUKOH, each remade as an adorable emoji: Migos' frontmen appeared as a beagle, a fox, and the infamous "poop" emoji; Childish Gambino assumed the guise of a glassy-eyed blue alien; and HYUKOH's trio morphed into a brown bear, a chicken, and a dragon. While a handful of Face ID commercials were focalized by white characters—a blonde high-schooler able to unlock her locker and much else "with a look"; a young man whose growing beard was no foil for Face ID; and a middle-aged man relieved to discover that online banking no longer required him to remember a password—the first and lengthiest of Apple's Face ID commercials, "Meet iPhone X," featured a cast memorable not simply for its diversitarian composition but for its racial ambiguity. In contrast to the subtle essentialism of later commercials, which employed ethnic attributes—African tribal paint and beads, Itajime scarves, chonmaje hairstyles, and hijabs, not to mention the stereotypes conjured by aliens, dragons, and excrement—as a means of signaling diversity and locating subjects in relation to racial points of origin, "Meet iPhone X" repeatedly frustrated essentializing notions of racial identity. Presenting an array of mixed-race subjects whose hybridized morphologies and idiosyncratic styles of dress exceeded common visual markers for racial typification—a freckled face done up with orange lipstick and peony eyeshadow, those neon hues set off in turn by a rainbow garland of outsize felt beads—the commercial instead celebrated an intensified if deeply familiar neoliberal conception of racial individualism implicitly opposed to the coarse, impersonal racial rubrics presumed to operate across security's bureaucratic institutions. Condensed by "the most unforgettable, magical password ever created: your face," security, in iPhone X's schema, emerged not as the controversial task of law enforcement but as the innate (read: magical) property of a given subject's racial-identitarian uniqueness, a property whose protections obtained not from the state's sometimes-overreaching vigilance but rather from the technical sophistication (read: magic) of Apple's biometric sensor, able to sublimate that subject's racial singularity into digital form.[1]

Significantly, Face ID’s enabling contradictions about personal security—that being hypervisible within corporatized spaces of mediatic simulation paradoxically renders one invisible or anonymous in the public spaces lying beyond them; that liberation from one’s body occurs by inhabiting it more fully; that a thoroughgoing racial individualism stands opposed to inevitably reductive race-based cultural politics—formulate themselves by way of tensions between essentialist and anti-essentialist, visual and anti-visual conceptions of racial identity institutionalized by neoliberalism’s ever-adapting rhetorics of colorblindness, multicultural diversity, and “post-racialism” (Figures 1 and 2). As Apple’s Face ID campaign suggests, and as this essay will explore, these tensions—between the affirmation and abolishment of racial identity categories; between choosing to recognize racial difference and choosing not to—assume new meaning in digital contexts where fantasies of racial individualization and unmarking collide, unfolding a logic of racial formation for a “post-race” era that, as critics Michelle Alexander, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, David Goldberg, and Nikhil Singh suggest, continues to define race through idioms of positive agency and individual particularity the better to obscure its enduring status as a relation of economic domination realized by the global wage differential and reinforced by the operations of the carceral and national security state.[2] Pictured alongside their Animoji counterparts, the ambiguously raced subjects of “Meet iPhone X” distill the terms of this logic, as they move between aspirationally mimetic spaces of identity confirmation and self-consciously artificial ones onto which racial essentialisms are silently offloaded between hyperindividualized, post-political sites of racial preference and customizability, and abject, posthuman ones where dragons encode Asianness and Black subjects get transmuted into excrement (Figure 3).

 <

https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/image-4.jpeg>

Figure 1. “Colorblindness,” iPod Campaign, 2000–11.

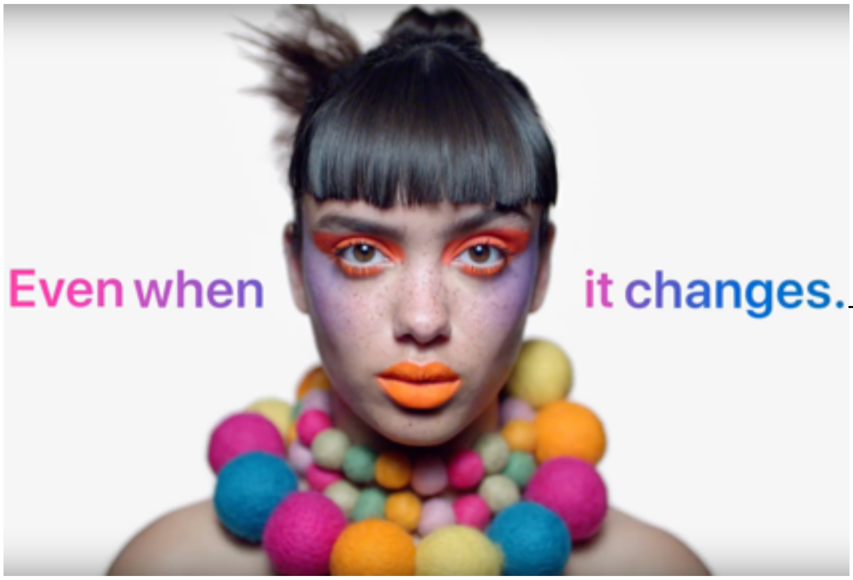


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Figure 2. “Post-Racial Individualism,” iPhone X Campaign, 2017.

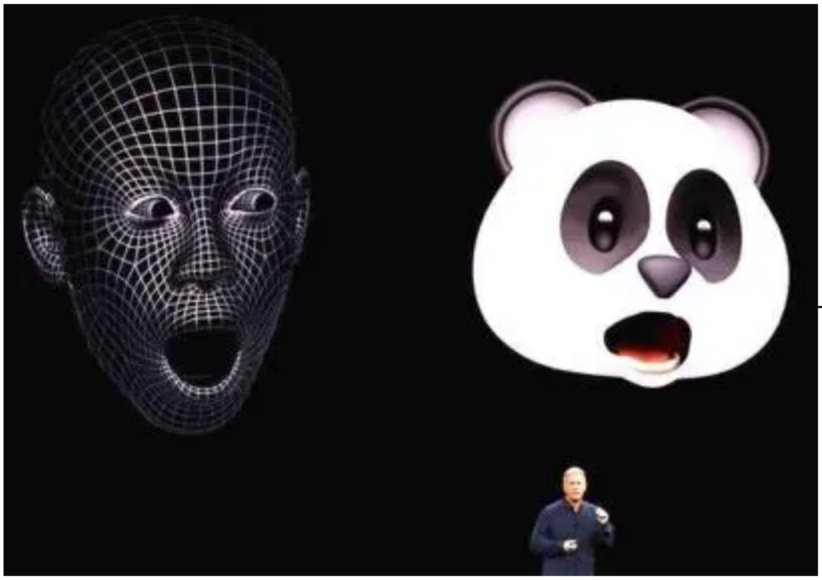

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Figure 3. “Mimesis/Abjection,” Animoji Press Event, 2017

This essay pursues versions of that “post-racial” racializing logic in recent novels of ethnicity by Bharati Mukherjee, Mohsin Hamid, and Teju Cole. Trained on US contexts of tech-intensified neoliberal capitalism and ongoing national security projects condensed around the US-led war on terror, these novels, like Apple’s Face ID campaign, attune themselves to race’s “conceptual instability” in a “climate of ascendant postracialism” that, as Madhu Dubey writes, “promotes a dangerously muddled view of race as a biologically real but politically defunct category.”[3] They consequently offer narratives in which protagonists’ racial identities will seem to disappear, mutate, and resurface as they move between shifting, differentiated zones of political inclusion and exclusion, within and across increasingly flexible national borders, and in and out of new technologies of algorithmic profiling and visual securitization. Unlike Apple’s iPhone X campaign, however, these novels do not fantasize about technology’s capacity to resolve contradictions between essentialist and anti-essentialist, realistic and artificial racial-representational regimes. Instead, by depicting in turn race’s obfuscation and its hypervisibility, its technical subsumption within neoliberal market logics of individual preference and its resurgence at the militarized borders of the nation, these texts highlight the complicities underlying these contradictions, showing how discourses of racial individualism counterbalance and sustain state security's ethno-nationalistic yet nominally antiracist practices.

Primed as they are to tensions between agential or individualist forms of racial self-definition and involuntary or imposed acts of racial ascription, then, these novels, I'll also argue, reframe mid-nineties debates over the politics of racial recognition initiated by Charles Taylor and Axel Honneth, and extended by a range of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century critical race theorists. Proposing that esteem for marginalized groups' authentic lived experience—recognition, that is, of their existential particularity—was a crucial prerequisite to these groups' attainment of institutional equity, Taylor and Honneth prioritized culture in the pursuit of formal racial recognition.[4] By contrast, Nancy Fraser proposed that questions of racial recognition were fundamentally paradigmatic and relational, rooted in a durable political economy of race whose renovation on the basis of culture risked "correcting inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying [capitalist] framework that generates them."[5] In place of a superficial politics that "deflect[ed] . . . questions of power and inequality into the relatively more malleable economy of cultural recognition"—recognition of the sort Apple cannily implicates in the preservation of real-world social and political protections—Fraser proposed the redress of historical racial injustices through "transformative remedies . . . aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying generative framework."[6] Rather than affirm race in cultural terms—an ambivalent recognitive gesture that, as Avery Gordon and Christopher Newfield argue, "attribute[s] a creative power to racial groups that lack . . . political and economic power" while neglecting the systems of social classification, dispossession, and management that sustain what Cedric Robinson terms "racial capitalism"—Fraser championed a fuller reckoning with the late-capitalist logics that continue to iterate racial inequality while representing neoliberalism's free markets as inequality's ultimate levelers.[7]

Recently, William Davies has sought to update Fraser's recognitive-redistributive paradigm for the platform-capitalist age, asking how "transformations in the public sphere have led to a mutation in how recognition is demanded and supplied."[8] "The key condition for this," Davies writes,

> is the digital platform, which has ushered in a new era of public participation in which recognition of status is never adequately achieved by anyone, so injustice feels ubiquitous. In the attention economy of social media, public actors may long for recognition, but have to settle instead for varying quantities of 'reputation,' or simply the 'reaction' of immediate feedback.[9]

As platform capitalism increasingly organizes public life around "numerical standards of judgement and justification—surveys, ratings, scoring systems"—so too does it seek to convert identity into calculable data, yielding speculative "marketized recognitions" of individuals' reputational merits as human capital in place of recognition itself. "The quest for recognition," Davies concludes, "is more exacting and slower than that for reputation, and appreciating this distinction is the first step to seeing beyond the cultural limits of the platform, towards the broader political and economic obstacles that currently stand in the way of full and equal participation."[10] For Davies, the challenge for contemporary progressive movements lies in disentangling from platform capitalism the positive agencies and robust collectivities it would channel and circumscribe, replacing, as Hito Steyerl writes, "proprietary scheme[s] with . . . cooperative scheme[s]," "human capital" configurations with "humanity."[11]

In what follows, I offer brief readings of Bharati Mukherjee's *Miss New India* (2011) and Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) before turning at length to Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011) to elaborate a theory of "post-racial" recognition honed by the terms outlined above. Keyed to the evolving forms of agency and identity mediated by digital platforms, all of these novels narrate the breakdown of network-era fantasies of racial individualism while staging race's categorical reassertion in a post-9/11 global security apparatus that, as Erica Edwards suggests, continues to collapse Black and Brown subjects under allegedly race-blind rubrics of threat, fear, and terror.[12] Chronicling the fortunes of a Bangalorean call-center agent and a Pakistani-born US financial-industries wunderkind, Mukherjee and Hamid's novels demonstrate the implication of economic and actual forms of terrorism performed by newly-technologized "third-world" entrants to the global neoliberal order. Mukherjee's Anjali and Hamid's Changez both indulge in fantasies of their labor's de-racing via networking tech: Anjali crafts an elaborate persona as "Janey Busey," an imaginary Illinoian operator whose regional accent she has been instructed to mimic, while Changez luxuriates in his assimilation to the honorarily white capital body of the elite Wall Street firm for which he values international businesses. Yet both are progressively drawn into racialized mechanisms of security, profiling, and capture that equate their Indian and Pakistani identities—if also their performance of outsourced technical and financial-speculative labor—with terrorist activity. Culminating in dramatic scenes of racial misrecognition, where Anjali and Changez are suddenly interpellated into the category of Muslim terrorist, Mukherjee and Hamid's texts mark out a "post-racial" recognition paradigm that compels contemporary Black and Brown subjects to shuttle between digital platforms' isolating yet putatively agential identities and the reductive orders of visual typification that underwrite post-9/11 counterterror practices of securitization.

Cole's *Open City* significantly nuances and elaborates this paradigm. An extended allegory for race's systemic drag in a "post-racial" climate of platform capitalism, the novel presents a series of literary and philosophical reflections issued in the antiquarian prose of its brooding protagonist Julius, a half-Nigerian, half-German psychiatry resident whom nearly all of the novel's critics have identified as a modern-day flâneur. Over the course of its twenty-one short chapters, *Open City* tracks Julius as he "aimlessly wanders" about New York, meeting with a diverse catalogue of friends and encountering a number of African and African American strangers who invite him to identify with an objectified Blackness organized around a set of cultural stereotypes.[13] The novel also recounts Julius's brief trip to Brussels, where he goes in search of his German grandmother, as well as a handful of Julius's seemingly random memories from his childhood in Nigeria. Alternating between scenes of technologically-mediated communion in which Julius conceives of himself as an unmarked cosmopolitan subject liberated from categories of identity made manifest at the level of physical appearance, and Fanonian scenes of visual recognition in which Julius is abruptly hailed as an "African" according to an expansive rubric of Blackness,*Open City* dramatizes race's "conceptual instability" (to recall Dubey) as it moves between two vectors of "post-racial" racialization: tech-intensified neoliberal market logics that expand racial distinction to serve Julius's increasingly individualistic conceptions of his identity, and militarized regimes of hypervisibility operative in the projects of US and global counterterrorism that conversely reduce Julius's racial identity to coarse, embodied schemas of subalternity, culture, and color. Tracing out a literary protocol of "post-racial" recognition that belies these vectors' opposition and foregrounds instead their mutual reinforcement of global white supremacy and US empire, the novel consequently compels a "post-racial" reading practice in which depth reading—reading for race's ontological invalidity—paradoxically uncovers and renews its mimetic coordinates.

“Post-Racial” Infrastructures

> Janey Busey of Rock City, Stephenson County, Illinois, rose from the ashes of Anjali Bose of Gauripur, Bihar, India. On the CCI computer she Google-Earthed the Rock City street map and even found “her” house; she memorized the population (only 315, she noted with horror; not even the poorest, most isolated Indian village was that insignificant); median age an elderly 33.5—and 99.7 percent non-Hispanic white, whatever that meant. Median family income, twenty-five thousand dollars, just a quarter-lakh; median house value under one lakh dollars.
>
> Insofar as reality can be composed of raw data, Anjali had created Rock City. The rest of her virtual life was inspired by her own unbounded longings. Janey Busey had grown up in a cheerful, wholesome, Midwestern family of five, headed by a veterinarian father and nurtured by a gift-store-owning mother. She replaced [her own] sullen [sister] Sonali with two good-hearted, extroverted brothers, Fred and Hank. Fred worked in Rock City’s only bank and aspired to become a manager. Hank toiled in the office of the town’s only insurance firm, though he dreamed of building boats and sailing to Mexico. Puerto Vallarta, to be exact. [Anjali Bose’s] Vasco da Gama High School and College morphed into [Janey Busey’s] Lincoln High, where kids from Rock City had to hold their own against swaggerers from Chicopee and Davis. Then she got swept off her feet by her fantasies and invented sweet summer experiences of working weekdays in the big Wal-Mart in Freeport and flirting with a stock boy named Karl. She brought herself to tears just thinking of poor, slow, inept Karl shipping out to Iraq with hopes of returning with money enough for college.[14]

A lower-middle-caste Bengali girl from the semi-urban town of Gauripur, Anjali Bose reinvents herself in high-tech Bangalore as “Angie,” an Americanized alter-ego who surfs the Internet and sips iced coffee while savoring the designer saris borrowed from her rich Muslim friend Husseina, who later turns out to be a terrorist. Donning Husseina’s luxury clothes and attempting to pass for the upper-caste “Angie” by day, Anjali spends her nights as “Janey Busey,” a fictional Illinoian call-center agent whose American clients occasionally discern her Indian origins. “Where the hell y’all setting at right now?” one aggrieved client demands. “India? I used to be on y'all's side, but when I get off the phone I'm fixing to call my congressman." Moving between Bangalore's increasingly caste-mobile social expanse and the supposedly deracializing affordances of digital platforms, both conceived by Anjali as fantasy spaces in which she might fashion an identity by means of what Mark Poster calls "performative self-constitution," Anjali's race and caste resurge in a climactic scene at Bengaluru airport where she is mistaken for Husseina, who has recently attempted to bomb Heathrow.[15] Hailed as a Muslim terrorist, Anjali's reracialization occurs in tandem with her renewed membership in the global precariat:

> [The detective] wet his right index finger, opened the passport to its front page, and shoved it in Anjali's face. She jerked her head back enough to make out a passport headshot of Husseina wearing the Panzer Delight T-shirt she had traded [for one of Husseina's designer saris]. "You are seeing name of holder, isn't it? Your good name but not face?"
>
> How gullible she had been when she had given up her favorite T-shirt! "We could be sisters," Husseina had gushed, and Anjali had been flattered. No wonder Husseina had asked her friendly questions about her birthday and place of birth.[16]

At this moment, Anjali's racial identity, previously masked by complex digital platforms and abstracted within the networked division of labor at the Bangalorean IT firm, suddenly returns through crude war-on-terror rubrics that render her interchangeable with the terrorist, Husseina. Already implicated in a form of economic terrorism—a usurper of American jobs by dint of her employment in the offshore tech industry, no longer on the right "side" of American commerce—Anjali is further implicated in an act of terrorist violence on the basis of her visual likeness to a Muslim friend. Alert to the enduring priority of race's visual epistemologies, then, Mukherjee's novel begins to outline the capacious post-9/11 "security theater" that submits Black and Brown subjects to what Derek Gregory calls "militarized regime[s] of hypervisibility."[17] "Imagining levels of terror potential intertwined as fields of visible identity," such regimes, Junaid Rana and Keith Feldman add, “collapse sartorial, physiognomic, and behavioral signifiers into a racial threat” by “deploy[ing] sight as the primary racial technology to lock . . . [the Muslim] subject in place and force its ontology into a terrifying relation to white supremacy.”[18]

Locked into Husseina’s identity as a Muslim terrorist, Anjali is consequently reduced to a version of the “crushing objecthood” Frantz Fanon associates with non-white subjects’ persistent racial non- and mis-recognition: their simultaneous invisibility and hypervisibility as objects of white-supremacist determination.[19] Relegated to what Fanon describes as a “zone of nonbeing,” Anjali’s recognitive typification by the counterterror state thus emerges as the immediate consequence of white-supremacist discourses revived and intensified by the war on terror, if also as the far subtler artifact of a network-consolidated global labor regime whose mediating objects and infrastructures continue to be posited as levelers of racial difference.[20] Delinked from visual epistemologies of biology and culture and recast according to digital platforms’ individualist logics of “performative self-constitution” that allow her to inhabit such placative identities as “Janey Busey,” Anjali’s race appears—if only temporarily—as the ambivalent property of platform capitalism’s supposedly neutral and abstracting labor formats, her seemingly expansive agency derived from altogether fluid racial coordinates. But it is perhaps more accurate to suggest that, in registering processes of racial formation occurring in tandem with that apparent fluidity, beneath the discourse of “post-racialism” and within the hidden technical registers of the networked global economy, *Miss New India* theorizes Anjali’s race as both the abstract correlate to economically motivated national borders maintained by the global wage differential and simultaneously the blunt, neo-colonial marker of disposable life. Inhabiting that contradiction, Anjali’s voluntary transformation into Janey Busey and subsequent, involuntary arrest as Husseina both work to convey the race concept’s extraordinary mutability in the twenty-first century: its categorical imbrication with tech-finance capitalism’s latest techniques of value creation, and its functional adaptation to what Allen Feldman describes as national sovereignty's increasingly "flexible spatial pathogenesis" as it "moves from the exteriority of the transnational frontier into the core of the securocratic state."[21]

Like *Miss New India*, Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* meditates on race's conceptual mutation in a period of global technocratic expansion and alongside the ongoing US-led war on terror. Specifically, the novel queries the relationship between pre-2008 regimes of deregulated finance and the proliferation of private-sector military and intelligence operations in what James Risen calls the post-9/11 US "homeland security-industrial complex."[22] Hamid's novel centers on the pre- and post-9/11 experience of Changez, a Pakistani-born student and financial-industries wunderkind whose job at the elite Wall Street firm Underwood Samson involves applying financial "fundamentals" to the valuation of international businesses. Following the World Trade Center attacks, Changez, who has previously basked in New York City's aspirational "post-racialism," suffers a string of racial abuses at the hands of resentful white Americans. Disillusioned by the resurgence of his essential "Pakistaniness"—previously "invisible, cloaked by [his] suit, by [his Underwood Samson] expense account, and—most of all—by [his white American] companions"—Changez returns to Pakistan and begins to engage in "fundamentalist" anti-American activity at a local university, a rejection of neoliberalism's hollow identitarian rhetoric if also a pointed rebuttal to its corollary ideology of "flexible citizenship."[23] He subsequently finds himself under surveillance by an American intelligence contractor sent either to capture or kill him. Narrating the emergence of a war-on-terror racial infrastructure, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* shows how Changez's racial identity, at first assimilated into the honorarily white capital body of Underwood Samson and free to cross national borders with impunity, gets drawn into racialized mechanisms of security, profiling, and capture that equate his Muslim identity—if also, significantly, his technical talents as a financier—with that of a terrorist. Allegorizing connections between one set of predictive models (the financial-speculative valuation work at which Changez excels) and another (the preemptive work of terrorist profiling to which Changez falls victim), Hamid, like Mukherjee, marks the collusion of economic and actual forms of terrorism as key to the terrorist's "post-racial" reconceptualization: cannily recoding terrorism as the effect of technical competencies keyed not to the violent, material takedown of American civilians but rather the undermining of increasingly "immaterial," translocalized sites of American commerce, Hamid locates the terrorist at the nexus of third-world precarity and tech-finance savvy, attributes that subtly rebind "terror" with "race."

For Annie McClanahan, that rebinding implicates the actions of first-world financiers with third-world terrorists, revealing how "late capitalism creates the conditions of possibility for terrorism."[24] Noting the novel's emphasis on Pakistan's crushing foreign debt, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, she concludes, proposes that "the secular 'fundamentalism' of free market capitalism spreads precarity like a social contagion . . . [that] always threatens to return to the source in the form of 'fundamentalist' violence."[25] Read in tandem with Joseph Darda's account of the novel's "dialectic of finance and precarious life," firms like Underwood Samson, John Macintosh writes, are shown to "exacerbate precarious conditions in the Global South" by way of their "seemingly mundane" workings—agents for the "less spectacular but very real violence occasioned by the daily functioning of global finance, the imperatives of shareholder value, and the international division of labor."[26] Enacting terrorism's more manifest violence so as to lay bare the "degradation of labor enforced through a circuit between the Global South and the deindustrializing US," Hamid thus offers a critique of the global devaluation of labor power wrought by systems of speculative and translocalized capital circulation that, as Jean and John Comaroff observe, promote the free flow of commodities and services while binding the workers who produce them ever more tightly to the national economies out of which their labor emanates.[27] This binding of production to national markets, the Comaroffs suggest, is what generates labor's lowest common denominator, giving rise to a global wage differential that effectively reracializes that labor, renewing divergences in wealth between the nations of the global North and South. Those divergences are in turn exacerbated by the "explosion of new monetary instruments and markets, aided by ever-more-sophisticated means of planetary coordination and space time compression, [which] have allowed the financial order to achieve a degree of autonomy from 'real production,' unmatched in the annals of modern political economy."[28] At a time when the nation and its borders are claimed to be obsolete, then, capital circulates with increasing virtuality, seemingly independent of material production. But the unseen laboring forces whose competencies capital exploits remain fatefully nation-bound to material sites of production, "reserve armies of spectral workers" whose relationship to the goods they manufacture is now "all but unfathomable, save in fantasy."[29]

Just as Mukherjee underscores Anjali's ultimate powerlessness to transcend her race and caste, the militarized borders of the nation marking her subjective limits, so too does Changez's repatriation to Pakistan emblematize his labor's reracing within with tech-finance capitalism's increasingly "spectral" configurations of global wealth. Like *Miss New India*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* thus registers how, within platform capitalism's increasingly spectral identity formations, race is nevertheless made to accord with accumulation's continually recalibrating imperatives as those imperatives play out across US empire's flexible "zones of being" and "nonbeing." Like those invisible mechanisms that regulate Underwood Samson's cryptic financial transactions, race, too, Hamid's novel tells us, underwrites capitalism's ever-adapting accumulative modes, an invisible social technology congealed beneath the surface of new forms of wealth.

The New Politics of Recognition

Set in late 2006 and into 2007, a period bookended by Facebook's worldwide launch and the original iPhone's US release, the twenty-one short chapters that comprise Teju Cole's *Open City* are framed and roughly chronologized by the dozen or so “aimless walks” taken by its protagonist Julius, a half-Nigerian, half-German psychiatry resident whom nearly all of the novel’s critics have identified as a modern-day flâneur.[30] Often detailed in conjunction with Julius’s accounts of the migration patterns of New York’s local birds, the walks also serve to focus Julius’s wide-ranging thoughts on art, music, literature, philosophy, politics, and history, as well as to relate conversations between Julius and the many racially diverse individuals he meets in New York and abroad. These interlocutors include Julius’s former professor, a Japanese-American internee; a Barbudan museum guard; a Liberian immigrant awaiting deportation in Queens; a Haitian bootblack; a Belgian cardiac surgeon; a Czech travel agent with whom Julius has a brief affair; an African American postal worker; and a Moroccan philosophy student who runs a cybercafé in Brussels. Chapters in which Julius converses with these and other characters take the form of biographical vignettes, often honed by the discussion of a work of literature or philosophy. These works range suggestively from *Beowulf* and *Piers Plowman* to Walter Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History,” Kwame’s Appiah’s *Cosmopolitanism*, and Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*. Interspersed with these conversation-driven chapters are a handful in which Julius relates memories of his childhood in Nigeria, including his flogging by a Nigerian Military School instructor, the death and burial of Julius’s father, and a scene of sexual awakening centered on Julius’s secret enjoyment of a Coca Cola. Throughout the novel, Julius reflects upon his racial identity as a Nigerian-German émigré and attempts to work through his relation to his immediate American surroundings, his distant African homeland, and his more distant German lineage. Repeatedly, *Open City* describes Julius’s refusal to identify with numerous African and African American strangers—and this despite his persistent feelings of isolation. The novel ends by recounting a traumatic incident suffered by Julius, and by revealing another perpetrated by him: Julius is mugged and beaten by a group of African American teenagers; soon afterward, a Nigerian schoolmate named Moji, also living in New York, alleges that Julius raped her at a party several years ago. Although the allegation goes unconfirmed, the incident lends the novel diegetic closure by furnishing a psychological explanation for Julius's melancholy and his walking habit.

Moving between the city's ethnic enclaves, from Chinatown and Harlem to racially unmarked yet implicitly whitened zones on the Upper West Side and the Financial District, Julius's walks afford him time to ruminate on everything from the anatomy of the bedbug to the Ugandan and Rwandan genocides. These musings, Erica Edwards writes, work to connect New York's neighborhoods to global sites of US imperialism and war, evincing an expansive post-9/11 racial-spatial regime in which the "geographic logics of segregation [have been transposed] onto the geographic practices of surveillance, policing, and invasion."[31] In this way, Edwards argues, *Open City* renders continuous the histories of US "domestic racial terror—the racial terror of slavery and Jim Crow, of lynching and the War on Drugs—[and] the imperatives of counterterrorism" in order to show how "new technologies of geopolitical control [have] intensified the existing cartographies of race."[32] In so doing, the novel describes a contemporary world reordered by policies of preemptive war, torture, incarceration while showing how this reordering comes to bear on post-9/11 literary forms of racial being and collective experience.

Building on Edwards' claims, I'd like to suggest that *Open City* surveys race's post-9/11 respatialization and elaborates the novel of ethnicity's formal reckoning with new systems of anti-Blackness that conflate fears of "terror" with "Black criminality, gangs, prison culture and urban violence" by showing how Julius's race coheres out of a type of subjective patterning that unfolds across the spatial and temporal contexts through which he moves.[33] In this view, *Open City* depicts the intensification of existing racial cartographies while also positing Julius's race as a peculiar cartographic effect, one that emerges out of the interplay between a highly particularized vector of "post-racial" individualism the novel associates with platform-intensified sites of capital mobility and mediation (located in Julius's "aimless wandering" in and about New York's Time Warner Center, Wall Street, and Financial District, and bound up with his voluntary affiliations with an elite, cosmopolitan class of artists and intellectuals) and a reductive, reracializing vector of monolithic Blackness (located at sites of economic precarity and containment such as the Queens Detention Facility and historically Black neighborhoods such as Harlem, and organized by Julius's involuntary encounters with Black criminals, undocumented immigrants, and al-Qaeda sympathizers, avatars for those threatening, fearful, and terroristic populations disproportionately targeted for deportation, incarceration, torture, and extermination under what Simone Browne describes as post-9/11 "security theater.")[34]

Attuned to that vectoral interplay, such a reading of the novel reframes critical preoccupation with *Open City*'s ambivalent cosmopolitanism, variously elaborated by Katherine Hallemeier, Alexander Hartwiger, Emily Johansen, Madhu Krishnan, Lily Saint, and Pieter Vermeulen. For these critics, the diversity of Julius's cultural encounters belies their ethical and political impotence; it thereby signals Cole's skepticism about cosmopolitan aesthetic practice's capacities to motivate empathic cross-cultural connection or redress real-world injustice. By way of thickening these claims, my account of *Open City*'s "post-racial" vectorization scheme emphasizes the compensatory and prophylactic nature of Julius's cosmopolitan self-fashioning, implicating that self-fashioning in discourses of racial and "post-racial" individualism intensified by platform capitalism and facilitated by its technical anatomization of the subject, while setting Julius's supposed freedoms of identity and movement against the supranational backdrop of global securitization projects that continue to undermine cosmopolitanism's multiply-allegiant subjects through the collapse of Black and Brown subjects under allegedly race-blind rubrics of threat, fear, and terror. In so doing, I argue for the entailment of Cole's apparent skepticism about cosmopolitanism's reparative virtues within his much subtler critique of a contemporary "post-race" moment that has come to view race as what Alexander Galloway terms an "affective predilection"—a matter of individual preference, aesthetic liberation, and technical customizability—rather than a historical-materialist category immanent to the workings of the capitalist world system.[35] If, like Anjali and Changez, Julius luxuriates in platform capitalism's capacious agencies and identifications across the first of these vectors, so too does he confront those identifications' violent attenuation across the second, his struggle for individual recognition ossified into collective stigma.[36]

For much of *Open City*, Julius pursues an identity along the first vector, conceiving of himself not only as a "post-racial" subject but an entirely unmarked one, unbound by the body as a site of epidemiological definition or material limitation. As such a subject, Julius exceeds the flâneur's privileged movement though space and assumes, instead, a curiously disembodied and non-identitarian perspective akin to that of the "virtual flâneur" theorized by Lev Manovich: the "prince who everywhere rejoices in his incognito."[37] Able to see and move beyond typical frames of reference, Julius never assumes that any city space is off limits to him, wandering with ease from the poorest neighborhoods in Harlem to luxury boutiques in Lower Manhattan, his "mobilized virtual gaze" peering down into the African Burial Grounds submerged beneath lower Manhattan, and rising up to the aerial viewpoint of migrating geese.[38] Inhabiting a perspective Hamish Dalley describes as "global-local," where "spatio-temporal locations can be constellated to create an ungrounded, non-teleological historical awareness," Julius consequently fashions an identity bound by the parameters of culture and knowledge rather than those of the physical world, casting himself a lover of Mahler, Bach, and Fela Kuti, a student of Freud, Appiah, and Benjamin.[39] After all, Julius declares, "Mahler's music is not white, or black, not old or young, and whether it is even specifically human, rather than in accord with more universal vibrations, is open to question."[40] A counterpart to his conversations with an elite class of artists and intellectuals, Julius will commune with these universal vibrations while listening to the "disembodied voices" of German, French, and Dutch Internet radio personalities, reading aloud passages from Roland Barthes, Peter Altenberg, and Tahar Ben Jelloun.[41] Suspending his actual body, and experiencing what Mark Hansen describes as the “paradox of disembodied embodiment,”[42] Julius proceeds to imagine himself as neither Black nor white, but rather some other peculiar digital entity much like the audio data into which Mahler’s music has been converted, a thing capable of “mingl[ing]” with the fiber-optically-delivered “murmur of . . . the radio, or with the thin texture of violins.”[43]

> I would sometimes listen to the radio. I generally avoided American stations, which had too many commercials for my taste—Beethoven followed by ski jackets, Wagner after artisanal cheese—instead tuning to Internet stations from Canada, Germany, or the Netherlands . . . . I liked the murmur of the announcers, the sounds of those voices speaking calmly from thousands of miles away. I turned the computer's speakers low and looked outside, nestled in the comfort provided by those voices . . . . Those disembodied voices remain connected in my mind, even now, with the apparition of migrating geese. Not that I actually saw the migrations more than three or four times in all: most days all I saw was the colors of the sky at dusk, its powder blues, dirty blushes, and russets, all of which gradually gave way to deep shadow. When it became dark, I would pick up a book and read by the light of an old desk lamp . . . . Sometimes, I even spoke the words in the book out loud to myself, and doing so I noticed the odd way my voice mingled with the murmur of the French, German, or Dutch radio announcers, or with the thin texture of the violin strings of the orchestras, all of this intensified by the fact that whatever it was I was reading had likely been translated out of one of the European languages. [44]

The "odd" feeling of "intensity" Julius experiences as a result of his voice's "mingling" with those "disembodied" European voices delivered by the Internet belies its fundamental nonrelationality, a "sonic fugue" enacted in the echo-chamber of Julius's "sparse apartment."[45] And yet, despite the fugue's apparent difference from the face-to-face and one-on-one encounters that preoccupy Julius throughout *Open City*—dynamic exchanges rich in physical description and shared feeling—this thoroughly solitary interculturality offers Julius an "intense" and even totalizing format for individual expression predicated on the very mediation that renders it nonrelational: masked by the audio interface, Julius is free to enact a version of Apple's prophylactic individualism, combining elements of his Nigerian and German heritage with French (Barthes), Austrian (Altenberg), and Moroccan (ben Jelloun) cultural personas to form a complex entity that is, to recall Julius's account of Mahler's music, neither white nor Black, not old nor young, nor even especially human. In this view, the "post-racial" and even "post-human" identity Julius performs, and the equally "post-racial" and "post-human" collective he imagines himself to join, both arise out of familiar utopian investments in digital networks' putative ability to liberate identity into fuller expressive orders by transcending otherwise static

> categories of embodied difference—their capacity, that is, to facilitate hyperindividual identity performances unbeholden to normative racial scripts while recoding these solitary performances as intersubjective social acts.

Julius dwells on figures for the technical abstraction of embodied difference and interculturality's networked "intensification" throughout *Open City*. Midway through the novel, he marvels at the silent "together[ness]" of a diverse group of patrons at a cybercafé in Brussels, struck by the fact "that such a small group of people really could be making calls to such a wide spectrum of places," "liv[ing] together but still keep[ing] their own values intact."[46] Another scene sees Julius liken subway passengers to bits of information traveling along buried wire: "[t]he sight of large masses of people hurrying down into underground chambers was perpetually strange to me, and I felt that all of the human race were rushing . . . into movable catacombs . . . [where their] unacknowledged traumas [and] solitude[s] intensified."[47] Resonant with platform capitalism's subterranean fiber optic networks, New York's subway appears as a system wherein persons, like data, dart from one line to another, their private traumas "intensified" in an image of what Ruha Benjamin describes as digital systems' subtle "codifying [of] existing social prejudices."[48]

Cole develops these parallels between urban and digital infrastructures in the scene immediately following this one, where Julius meditates on the conceptual relation between the disembodied flow of data and the flow of money and labor in the global economy. Chancing upon New York's Time Warner Center, onetime site of the historic merger between media conglomerate Time Warner and Internet provider AOL, Julius observes that the Center contains "apartments that include . . . the most expensive residence in the city." The comment gestures subtly to the Center's notoriety as a "safe[ty] deposit box" and laundering site for the fraudulently-acquired wealth of foreign investors hailing from Russia, India, Colombia, China, Kazakhstan, and Mexico—many of whom have been able to move their wealth abroad and keep it anonymous, thanks to Time Warner's famously relaxed real estate policies.[49] Figured forth by Time Warner's anonymous buyers, and enacted within the Center's opaque system of global investment, then, Julius's brief visit to Time Warner intimates the difference between the types of laboring bodies that will seem to enjoy capital's unrestricted freedom of movement (elite, de-raced bodies such as those of Time Warner's investors, and also of the high-skill intellectual class whose exclusive company Julius maintains) and those other bodies that will remain confined by racial categories and national borders both (the highly raced, proletarian, and precarious laborers on the opposite end of an ever-widening gap between rich and poor, affiliation with whom Julius consistently rejects), between the fantasies of "capitalist individualization, accumulation, and legitimization" located at the rhetorical center of Internet utopianism, and race's systemic drag within a putatively "post-racial" phase of accelerated capitalism.[50] With varying degrees of explicitness, each of these scenes configures the Internet as a site for the "post-racial" imaginary, registering at once race's obfuscation within the digital mode of production—its hiddenness beneath complex technical platforms and proxying by data infrastructures—and its simultaneous expansion according to market logics of individual preference, customizability, and qualitative specialness. Through Julius's visions of racial unmarking and "performative self-constitution," then, *Open City* outlines the first vector "post-racial" formation along which his race obtains: abstracted from his actual body, Julius's race gets remade as an "affective predilection," a fine-grained category of distinction wholly amenable to the digital platforms' "new customized micropolitics of identity management."[51]

Against these scenes of racial unmarking and customizability, Julius's ostensibly aimless walks repeatedly lead him to encounter African persons and products in whose presence his race gets operationalized at the level of visual phenotype and through a stereotypical repertoire of Blackness: on the first and last of his wanderings, Julius takes arbitrary detours and winds up in Harlem, where he observes a diverse community of Africans and African Americans. In between, Julius's walks yield chance encounters with an African-born cabdriver, a Haitian bootblack, and an African American postal worker. On another occasion, after he involuntarily fails to exit the subway at his neighborhood stop, Julius embarks on a spontaneous tour of Rector street and winds up in a restaurant just across from the World Trade Center disaster site. There, he speaks with a Barbudan security guard. Other outings lead Julius to confront a former classmate from Nigeria, a Guyanese repairman, a Liberian detainee, a Congolese bartender, and an African American World War II veteran. Julius's final walk through Harlem ends in a confrontation with three African American teenagers, who beat Julius and steal his wallet and cellphone. Other encounters feel similarly engineered, as though generated by a predictive algorithm: a conversation on the German occupation of Brussels ends with the suggestion that Julius listen to the late works of Art Blakey and Cannonball Adderley. A citation from *Elizabeth Costello* inexplicably leads Julius to consider the history of the New York slave trade. After viewing *The Last King of Scotland*, Julius encounters two children who make strange hand gestures at him and ask if he's "a gangster."[52] Later, Julius's memory of a recently-ended relationship shifts into his contemplation of the Haitian revolution. Finally, after visiting a Jamaican restaurant, Julius bumps into a subway passenger reading Octavia Butler's *Kindred*.

With the exception of Julius's assault by the Harlem teens, each of these encounters unfolds similarly: a gesture of racial kinship is extended by the interlocutor, and subsequently rebuffed by Julius. The African cabdriver, for instance, feels slighted when Julius fails to greet him upon entering his car. "Not good, not good at all, you know," the driver chides, "the way you came into my car without saying hello, that was bad. Hey, I'm African just like you, why you do this?"[53] Although Julius apologizes for his behavior, he is irritated by the driver's presumption. "I said, I'm so sorry about it, my mind was elsewhere, don't be offended, ehn, my brother, how are you doing? . . . [But] I wasn't sorry at all. I was in no mood for people who tried to lay claims on me."[54] Throughout *Open City*, "claims" of this sort are continually laid upon Julius, and continually refused.

Kenneth, the Barbudan museum guard, attempts to discern Julius's racial background before delivering a monologue on his love of African culture: "[Kenneth] asked where I was from, what I did. He spoke fast, chattily. One of my housemates, once, in Colorado, he said, was a Nigerian. He was called Yemi. Yoruba, I think he was, and I'm really interested in African culture anyway. Are you Yoruba?"[55] Soon afterwards, Julius notices "that [Kenneth's] eyes were asking a question: a sexual question. I explained to him that I had to meet a friend. I apologized for not having a business card with me, and said something about visiting the museum again soon."[56] Later, an African American World War II veteran is moved to tell Julius how proud he is to come to Julius's psychiatry office and "see a young black man . . . in that white coat, because things haven't ever been easy for us, and no one has ever given us nothing without a struggle."[57] In the most dramatic of these "claims," a postal worker gushingly labels Julius a "visionary."

> Say, brother, where are you from? Cause, see, I could tell you were from the Motherland. And you brothers have something that is vital, you understand me. You have something that is vital for the health of those of us raised on this side of the ocean. Let me tell you something: I am raising my daughters as Africans.[58]

Captured in each exchange is a process of racialization that works to interpellate Julius into a vast yet tenuous web of Black transnationalism, where each interlocutor appears as a point or node upon that web, and each racial signifier—black, brother, Motherland, Africa—a keyword for its activation. Cued by Julius's skin color, functioning as an automatic index of cultural homophily, the encounters lock Julius into a mimetic economy of racial representation, convinced, as his African and African American interlocutors are, that Julius's appearance conveys not just his biological origins but also his inner being or essence—a special African "vision," and authentic cultural "vitality." In so doing, the encounters not only seize on the "racial epidermal schema" famously problematized by Fanon, in which skin color is taken to index the ontological truth of racial difference, but also instantiate a logic of visual knowability immanent to technologies of US counterterror and homeland securitization—digitized mapping, drone imagery, facial recognition—that, in Keith Feldman's words, "invest the visual with a heightened truth-[value] meant to extract the purported core identity of its racial object."[59] In this view, Julius's repeated hailing by African and African American strangers eager to solicit his identification with an objectified Blackness organized around a set of racial keywords and stereotypical images subtly formalizes the types of racial-interpellative mechanisms for "strategic characterization" and "pattern of life" profiling common to the preemptive targeting of suspected terrorists abroad, while also anticipating those mechanisms' increased deployment at home, adumbrating a range of anti-Black surveillance systems that will emerge in response to such decentralized movements as Black Lives Matter. Experienced by Julius as acts of racial misrecognition—distorted and demeaning assertions of his Africanness that undermine Julius's deeply cultivated "post-racialism"—the encounters consequently outline the second vector along which Julius's race coheres: hypervisual regimes of difference that render him, in John Cheney-Lippold's phrase, a broadly "measurable type" analyzable according to his "quotidian social patterns and minute divergences from those patterns."[60]

In its subtle exfoliation of what Herman Gray names the "regulatory role of race and difference" at the "peculiar confluence between . . . discourses of postracialism and security," then, *Open City*, like *Miss New India* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, suggests the race concept's contradictory operation at the turn of the twenty-first century, negotiating tensions between abstract and embodied, individualized and collective racial-recognitive mandates.[61] But if Mukherjee and Hamid's novels appear somewhat more adept at that negotiation, narrating the vectoral collapse of "post-racial" individuals into racialized types, Cole's might be understood to resist, at least in part, that collapse's determinant tidiness and formal stability—a goad, instead, to the preservation and deepening of race's constitutive aporias and ideological contradictions more so than confirmation of those contradictions' ever-adapting homology with capitalism's own.[62] Perhaps this is why *Open City* closes with Moji's accusation that Julius raped her some years ago—a "reveal" that, many critics note, does not so much grant the novel epistemological closure so much as compel readers to reexamine Julius's epistemological control of its narrative details. Syncing Moji's violation to Julius's own, experienced at the hands of the Harlem muggers but also by the string of African and African American "claimants" unwilling to concede Julius's distinction from a stereotypical Blackness, the "reveal" of Moji's rape appears yet another instance of racial misrecognition: not simply the absorption of Julius's identity into a stereotypical Blackness but the excavation of some malignant ontology that would seem to confirm that stereotype from within.[63] Puncturing Julius's meticulously crafted "post-racial" individualism, Moji's accusation effectively sunders Julius's attachments to an unmarked, elite class of artists and intellectuals and groups him, instead, with those stereotypically precarious and fearful Black and Brown populations affiliation with whom Julius has studiously avoided. But even as this gesture reiterates the mechanism of "post-racial" racialization in the manner of *Miss New India* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, exposing Julius's positive agency as an ideological fiction intensified by platform capitalism's fundamental abstractions, an idealized, "post-racial" self-regard hallucinated by Julius as compensation for the real world that, like those racist children on the New York subway, continues to perceive him as a "gangster," so does Cole's novel finally refuse racial ontology's submission to stereotype. As Cole himself notes, "[the 'reveal' of Moji's rape] is not 'the thing at the end.' It's been there all along, in the same way that [the social relations enabling rape are] around us all the time." "Readers," Dena Fehrenbach elaborates, "*should* have seen these social relations," and it's precisely their "sympathetic identification with [Julius's] monstrous fantasy" that Cole subsequently indicts. The novel, Fehrenbach concludes, "stages its own self-contradiction and ethical failure as a warning. There is no expedient way 'out' of *Open City* and the constraints it magnifies." So too, Cole might add, there's no expedient way 'out' of the contradictions that define race in the twenty-first century, even as those contradictions might yet undermine the capitalist world- systems whose interests they serve.

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Notes

1. Transcribed from "Meet iPhone X." All promotional videos for iPhone X are available at Apple's YouTube page: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hS18Zxpd6E0 < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hS18Zxpd6E0> . ↩
2. For these theorists "post-racialism" denotes not the end of race but rather the perpetuation of regimes of racial domination by state policies and institutions no longer permitted to invoke racial criteria explicitly. See Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New Press, 2012); Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); David Goldberg, *Are We All Postracial Yet*? (Polity Press, 2015); Nikhil Singh, "Racial Formation in an Age of Permanent War" in *Racial Formation in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. D. M. HoSang et al. (University of California Press, 2012), 276–301. ↩
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Maria Bose is an assistant professor of Communication at Providence College in Rhode Island, where she teaches and writes about the political economy of late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century culture. With Jason Willwerscheid, she’s now at work on a handful of books: *Capital Wasteland: Fallout and the Transaction of Gaming IP,* on the transmediation of Bethesda Studio’s Fallout franchise; *The PlayStation 4: Cinematicity and Sony’s Cross-Media Gambit,* on Sony's post-recession corporate-media evolution; and *States of Play: Deglobalization and its Mediaforms,* on AAA RPGs and the mediation of deglobalizing transition. She recently served on the advisory board of the Association for the Study of the Arts of the Present (ASAP).

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Crip Silences, Crip Futurities, Crip Joy

by Delores B. Phillips, Alyson Patsavas, Theodora Danylevich, Alyson K. Spurgas, Jess Whatcott and Angela Carter | Issue 14.2 (Fall 2025), Positions

ABSTRACT Delores Phillips and Cultural Studies Association's Crip Cultures/Critical Disability Studies Working Group Co-Host Theodora Danylevich discuss crip silences, crip futurities, and crip joy with authors Alyson Patsavas (University of Illinois, Chicago), Alyson K. Spurgas (Trinity College), and Jess Whatcott (San Diego State University). This podcast is accompanied by a scholarly commentary by Angela Carter.

KEYWORDS crip, cripistemology, futurity, joy, silence

Positions Season 2, Episode 3

Positions

Crip Silences, Crip Futurities, Crip Joy

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Six Ways of Looking at Crip Silence[1]

By Angela M. Carter

As listeners might expect,Critical Disability Studies scholarsPatsavas, Spurgas, Whatcott, and Danylevich do two useful things in Season 2, Episode 3 of *Positions*. First, they reflect on the authorial processes of "Cripistemologies of Crisis: Emergent Knowledges for the Present,"[2] as well as the cultural and political moment from which the special section emerged. Second, they expand the theoretical and methodological interventions we made then—during “Trump 1.0”—to analyze what we’re experiencing today. Of course, their discussion acknowledges that “what’s happening now has always been happening.” But the conversation isn’t in search of a conclusion. They are doing a secret third thing.

Perhaps it’s my flavor of neurodivergence or that I was raised up by women of color feminists, I don’t know. Either way, as I was listening, I felt transported almost immediately to the crowded corners of conference hallways; to the late night conversations “cripping out” with other disabled folk with snacks and coloring books, with outheat pads and pain killers; and to the kitchen tables[3] of our elders and ancestors. To me, this episode epitomizes the power of collective knowledge production, which is so often how crip knowledge production works. Knowledge through collaboration.[4] Knowledge through conversation as theory and theorizing.

This is not new. Nor is it particularly crip. Communal and collective knowing has emerged from marginalized peoples across time and space. The naming of crises as chronic is also not new or something only knowable through disabled life. Many others have named the invocation of emergency as a politicized rhetoric, and as nothing exceptional.[5] What is particular here is that Patsavas, Spurgas, Whatcott, and Danylevich are speaking from a crip positionality and from the genealogy of thought therein.

It is *absolutely* my favor of neurodivergence[6] that also led to me looking up the etymology of the word crisis while I was listening to the episode. Taken from the Greek *krisis,* crisis has been an inflection of cripistemology all along. It references a “decisive point in the progress of a disease” or a “turning point in a disease, that change which indicates recovery or death.”[7] Our friends Merriam and Webster offer a slightly different take, defining crisis as “an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending.”[8] Crisis as a point of discernment, a point where knowledge arises from a state of disease, or dis-ease, or as one might say, dis-ablement…

What meaning can we make of crisis today through this historicity when, as Patsavas asserts, chaos is the point? There is a moment about halfway through the episode where Danylevich and Patsavas begin a discussion about the different kinds of silence that arise from within and respond to crisis. Danylevich proposes two types: hegemonic silence and crip silence. In what follows, I aim to extrapolate and reorganize the powerful thinking of my colleagues and think alongside them.

Hegemonic Silence

Hegemonic silence is when silence is used against us. When we are silenced. This "we" is the "we" who collectively make up the majority yet remain minoritized. Hegemonic silence is silence that is weaponized to maintain the status quo. Its utilization is in service of systemic and ideological oppression. To identify hegemonic silence, we must start by identifying power and mapping power relations. Individual intention must give way to the weight of intergenerational impact.

Hegemonic silence is a silence forced upon us. It is also a chosen silence, with a "political agenda not to listen" as Danylevich remarks. It is choosing not to know or try to know or make space for knowing because doing so would disrupt power structures. Of course, this is the silence of our so-called political leaders about [author gestures emphatically to space around her] literally everything. And it is also the silence we are socialized into upholding because "we don't talk politics at the dinner table" especially the white dinner table on that Thursday in November. Hegemonic silence is internalized, justified, and perpetuated as acceptable silence.

Crip Silence

The distinction between hegemonic silence and non-hegemonic silence is a difference in socio-political power and agency. I have no anthropological source to back my statement, but I'd wager that oppressed peoples have always utilized silence in reclamation of our own empowerment. This episode's crip theorizing of silence expands upon many other theorizations from marginalized peoples, persons, and fields of academic inquiry.

As I imagined myself sitting around the kitchen table—who am I kidding? My crip ass eats meals on the couch. As I imagined myself eating food lounging around with Aly, Alyson, Jess and Theodora, I imagined the five us enumerating six ways of thinking about crip silence. Of course, one of us says, "but there has to be more than six." "Oh sure" another one of us remarks, "but maybe that's because there are really five. I mean who can know and does it even matter anyway?" We all nod in agreement, without saying a word.

1. Crip silence as survival

Our bodyminds[9] do amazing things to support our survival. When not pathologized, we can understand silence in so many ways. Late in this episode, Whatcott speaks from a place of vulnerability and reclaims the silence their bodymind demands as necessary. Silence as a form of somatic resourcing. We are non-verbal or we become non-verbal because that is what's necessary for our survival, for life to be livable, regardless of whether it "makes sense" to others. We move into silence when we are overwhelmed or overstimulated. We freeze. We stim. We retreat. Our bodyminds move us into silence to signify a deeper need and give us care.

Our crip bodyminds choose silence too. We remain silent because we know. We know in our bones that the things we would say could get us killed. This choice isn't one. It isn't appeasement or agreement. It's an act of survival in a world that wasn't built for us and is actively trying to eradicate us. It's not telling the doctors or social workers the whole truth because if we do, we won't get the resources we need to live. Our silences may be lies of omission, but they are necessitated by the carceral state whose executive orders justify putting people in cages. If we speak, we risk institutionalization and, as Spurgas reminds us of, the unapologetic resurgence of eugenics logic means this risk is one of life or death.

2. Crip silence as refusal

We're silent because words fail us, but we don't mind. We refuse the diagnostic imperative to conform our experiences in exchange. For us unrecognizability isn't a problem. We're silent because of the "limitations of language and the conventionality of most people's thinking."[10] We refuse to explain ourselves because we didn't agree to these terms. In fact, we reject them entirely. Why must we translate ourselves into the language of the oppressor, when the oppressor has already decided not to understand us, before we even speak? What if we didn't worship the spoken word?[11] What if we embraced our complexities instead of trying to confine ourselves? If recognizability is only possible through diminishing our complexity, are we really being recognized?

There can be power in remaining unknown and unknowable, in refusing comprehension. We don't need spoken words to make meaning or connect. We have other ways.

3. Crip silence as solidarity

Early in the episode, Patsavas details the emergence of "cripistemology" as a neologism that, like "any good neologism names something that community already knows." Later, Patsavas references Spurgas's work in saying that silence can be solidarity in falling apart because silence is what community gives us by “removing the imperative” for speech. Silence is a neologism.

Silence as solidarity is not an absence or a void, but of a deep *presence*-ing. It is the silence of listening, of witnessing, of memory work. It is the kind of connection from a shared place of knowing that doesn’t need or even want words. It is the nod from across the room saying, “I see you.” We use silence to hold space and create space that can hold us. We move in and with crip silence as a way of being and being with one another without trying to fix a problem or find a solution. There is no momentum in these acts of silence, just presence-ing. Just being. Alone. Together.

4. Crip silence as slowness

In a dominant culture of manufactured urgency, it is a revolutionary act to move slowly. Crip silence is in the slowness of our need for time to process. It is not a deficit but a cultivation of intentionality. Crip silence also appears to be slowness when really it reflects the hyper speeds in which our minds jump from thought to thought. This is not a deficit either, but rather the gap between our thinking and your insistence for normative “logic” and “comprehension.”

There is wisdom in thinking and moving slowly, in refusing the urgency of white supremacy culture,[12] even for those of us who didn’t or wouldn’t choose it. When we allow ourselves to think outside of pathologization, slowness becomes a respite where deliberate, intentional ways of knowing and being are cultivated. As Patsavas reminds us, when your world is smaller it’s easier to connect with meaning in every moment. The flip side that comes with urgency, manufactured or otherwise, is erasure.

5. Crip silence as imagining otherwise

Disabled life is an art form[13] where creativity is our tool of survival in a world that was not built for us and actively seeks our eradication. Through creative expression, meaning can be made and communicated in ways that aren't otherwise available. This is true in so many disabled experiences, including those of us who do not use spoken language to communicate. Through creative expression, worlds and futures can be imagined and mapped out in visionary ways that aren't allowed in our current material reality.

Art also reminds us that when we are making meaning the silence matters just as much as the sound. The words we say in poetry and the notes we play in music mean different things if we change the silences that surround them. Like all constructed binaries, the two are intertwined and interdependent.[14] As with disability and ability, Alison Kafer teaches us, this relationality is political.[15]

6. Crip silence as joyfulness

Silence can sometimes afford us a particular experience of spacetime[16] wherein we can be fully present and completely elsewhere all at once. I find joy in that and comfort in this kind of solitude. I deeply appreciate the discussion of joy that helped conclude this episode. Because even for those of us who will admit to having a hard time accessing it (I'm with you, Alyson Spurgas), cultivating joy—and its accompanying gratitude—is a revolutionary practice.

I see silence as integral to meaning making in every practice of joy that Patsavas, Spurgas, Whatcott, and Danylevich named, even—or perhaps especially—when it comes alongside sound: Reading, walking a dog, gardening, playing music and engaging in mutual aid—these practices connect us to something bigger than ourselves. As does the silent act of holding space, of holding up the crumbling walls of academia, so that our students can experience the joys of critically thinking and imaging otherwise.

Conclusion

Do not get it twisted. Like Patsavas, I have no interest in glorifying or romanticizing silence. I too have become more disabled since we wrote *Cripistemologies of Crisis,* and it is not easy or fun. (Spoiler alert: You too will become more disabled if you live long enough). My proposition in this commentary is that we learn to embrace the both/and, holding the multiple truths of silence all at once. At a critical point in the episode, Spurgas brings us back to mapping power and understanding solidarity as a verb. She asks whose responsibility it is to think about why silence is occurring, what kind of silence it is, who is responsible for responding. Who is responsible for speaking out when others cannot. My answer—which isn't mine at all but the answer of my crip, mad, ill, and neurodivergent elders and ancestors—is that we are all responsible.[17]

Audio Transcript

[00:00:00] **Delores Phillips:** Welcome to *Positions*: The Podcast of the Cultural Studies Association, sponsored and published through the Open Source Journal *Lateral*. Positions aims to provide critical reflection and examination on topics in cultural studies for scholars, students, and a general audience. Make sure to follow CSA and *Lateral* on socials and subscribe to our podcast to keep up with new episodes.

[00:00:32] **Delores:** In today's episode, I'm joined by the CSA Crip Cultures Critical Disability Studies Working Group co-chair, Theodora Danylevich, in conversation with: Jess Whatcott, author of *Menace to the Future*, published in 2024 by Duke University Press; Alyson Patsavas, author of the forthcoming book from University of Michigan Press titled *Pain in Relation*. And Alyson K. Spurgas, author of the 2020 monograph [00:01:00] *Diagnosing Desire*, published by Ohio State University Press, and co-author of *Decolonize Self-Care*, published by OR Books in 2022. Today we discuss crip silences, crip futurities, and crip joy. Enjoy the conversation.

[00:01:19] **Theodora Danylevich:** Yeah, so why don't we go around and we'll introduce ourselves. I am Theodora Danylevich, pronouns: she and they. I teach at Georgetown. I am co-chair of the Crip Cultures Working Group at the Cultural Studies Association.

[00:01:43] **Jess Whatcott:** I am Jess Whatcott. I use they/them pronouns. Professionally, I am an assistant professor, but I'm up for tenure at San Diego State University and I teach in a Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies department. I want to shout out my recent book, [00:02:00] *Menace to the Future: A Disability and Queer History of Carceral Eugenics*, which came out with Duke University Press in September. I theorize the concept that detention, institutionalization, and incarceration are forms of eugenics. But I also want to say that I am an abolitionist organizer, a relative, a community member. I'm a sci-fi and comics nerd, and I come from a white, working class community, which is a majority Christian sect, I guess I'll say. And I come from a family with many undiagnosed and untreated disabilities, chronic illnesses, mental and wellness, and neurodivergence, including myself. Happy to be here.

[00:02:50] **Aly Patsavas:** My name is Aly Patsavas. I'm an assistant professor in the Department of Disability and Human Development at the University of Illinois, Chicago. I'm also up for [00:03:00] tenure this year, so that's exciting, and looking forward to the–I don't know–exhale that that offers, I hope. I have a book forthcoming with the University of Michigan press called *Pain in Relation* that looks at cripepistemologies of pain, so kind of building a little bit on some of the work that Theodora and I did co-editing *The Cripistemologies of Crisis* that we are here to talk about today. I am a dog parent. I think that's the most interesting anecdote. And I just recently adopted a second pit bull puppy. So that is bringing me a little bit of joy in these very difficult, and, I don't know, precarious times. So I feel like we take what we can get.

[00:03:49] **Alyson Spurgas:** I'm Alyson Spurgas, and really honored to be here with you all. Professionally. I am an associate professor, fairly recently tenured, at Trinity College in the Sociology department, and I'm also affiliated faculty in the Women and Gender and Sexuality program. I have done some different organizing, and I'm trying to find the best place to put my energies in that regard right now. I'm trying to immerse myself in work in the higher ed experience at Trinity and Hartford, supporting students for justice in Palestine and the AAUP, since we don't have a union–private college–and I also love cats. I'm a cat parent. Yeah. And I have a couple books that I've written. One is called *Diagnosing Desire: Biopolitics and Femininity into the 21st Century*. And the piece that I wrote for *The Cripistemologies of Crisis* is an extension of my conclusion chapter where I really think through what it would mean to [00:05:00] fall apart primarily for feminized people and traumatized people to do that together, and I try to center, trans women of color's narratives within that framework. And then I also wrote a book called *Decolonize Self-Care*, along with my friend Zoë Meleo-Erwin.

[00:05:18] **Theodora:** Thanks so much, everyone. Yeah. I guess I should mention, I'm also a cat parent and I am a contingent faculty, and with that I'm doing a lot of labor organizing and other organizing at Georgetown.

[00:05:31] **Theodora:** So Jen [Scuro] and I decided to invite you all to come chat with us because while *The Cripistemologies of Crisis* edited small collection that we published together, all four of us plus Angela Carter, in 2021 was conceived and then published at sort of an unfortunately [00:06:00] parallel moment in Trump 1.0. We put it together sort of in that context and how crisis rhetorics were being deployed. So here we are, a whole pandemic and second Trump term. Now both a part of our ongoing crisis backdrops, one might say? What *The Cripistemologies of Crisis* was trying to do was both respond to a moment, but I think also put a finer point on what we mean by cripistemologies, by thinking about the constructed exceptionalism and episodic rhetoric of crisis and emergency that is in dissonance with a disabled experience and that can erase. The knowledge and strategy that lies within.

[00:07:00] **Aly:** The term *cripistemology* comes from Merri Lisa Johnson in conversation with Robert McRuer, where they were talking about disability specific knowledge production, but not just from the experiences of disabled people, but I think very specifically the knowledge that emerges from a kind of critical crip politic–that sensibility of the world by living with and in relation to disability, chronic illness, madness. She kind of coined the term cripistemology, and then it took a little bit of a life of its own that I think is kind of a fun trajectory that they trace in their introduction to the special issue [of the *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*] "Cripistemologies" in 2014, where it sort of became a term that traveled via social media before the actual publication of the special issue where they kind of elaborate on it. To me, I think that history is really important because it speaks to [00:08:00] something about what the best neologisms do: they name something that the community already knows. And I think that's part of what they did with cripistemologies, which literally just sort of puts "crip" and "epistemologies" together. But it's something that I think activists and organizers and disabled people and the crip community sort of knew immediately what it meant even as over the last ten, probably 15 years–if we go back to the original social media conversation that it sparked–have continued to elaborate on that.

[00:08:36] **Jess:** So in 2018 when we first had the panel at American Studies Association, I, at the time, was thinking about the Tubbs Fire, which in 2017 had burned millions of acres in Napa County and Sonoma County, which are north of [00:09:00] San Francisco in California. But that fire had moved from the sort of forest area into the incorporated city of Santa Rosa, and it killed 22 people, and it destroyed I think something like 5,000 structures, including businesses and homes. So there were people who had escaped this fire–it came so quickly. There were stories of people who jumped into swimming pools as fires raged around them. And then the Camp Fire happened the following year in 2018, which was in–kind of north of Sacramento, in North Central California. And it was in a more rural area, and it just devastated some small towns and sort of ex-urban places where people were living. It ended up killing 85 people and destroying 18,000 structures.

[00:10:00] **Jess:** So that was, yeah, the context within which I was thinking about Octavia Butler's novel, *Parable of the Sower*, which, shortly after the beginning of that book, the plot moves forward when there's a fire that cuts through the neighborhood where the protagonist is living. And in my article, I was thinking about Octavia Butler as someone who didn't necessarily identify as disabled, but had a learning disability and wrote a character who has a sort of made up disability called hyperempathy syndrome, which is a, you know, it's an actual disability—like, the character experiences it as disabling throughout the text. So I was thinking about this as a manual for survival of things like fire and other crises. So, cut to 2025: this [00:11:00] January was the Palisades Fire and the Eaton Fire in Los Angeles. People, including disabled folks….you know, we still are uncovering stories about folks who could not evacuate, and there was no infrastructure to evacuate those folks, due to them either being disabled or being caregivers for disabled people that they didn't want to leave behind.

[00:11:30] **Jess:** And the Eaton Fire swept through the historically black city of Altadena, which is just adjacent to Pasadena, where Octavia Butler grew up and the fire came up to the outskirts of the cemetery where Octavia Butler is buried. And the point I want to make is to sort of connect these two fires, or these three fires–2017, 2018, 2025–to think about the ongoing natures of the [00:12:00] emergencies that we're facing and the decades of divestment, crumbling infrastructure, almost non-existent safety nets, climate chaos, leading to repeated disasters, mass, premature death. I think it just shows that these are–to go back to one of the points made in the introduction of the special issue–these are not exceptional crises, but they're chronic and they're just layering on top of each other even as we're seeing an acceleration of some versions of those crises in the present. So, um, yeah. When I wrote my piece, I felt very nervous about it because I'm sort of making this anarchist argument that we can't rely on the government to survive climate chaos and neoliberal abandonment, but every time one of these disasters happens, it just makes this point more urgent than ever: I think that we have to figure out how to take care of each other, especially as we're seeing the dismantling of the limited. [00:13:00] Safety net that we had with the federal government and increasing climate chaos.

[00:13:04] **Theodora:** I mean, there is something about what you were saying, Jess, in Octavia Butler's anticipation of the failure of the status quo, which I think in itself is, you know, really powerful and something that may be a bit easier for us to see now. And there's something about close reading and good analysis being prophetic that I think I want to sort of throw in there, and that it's not actually about looking to the future, it's actually about learning from patterns and learning from history.

[00:13:43] **Alyson:** There wasn't like a specific event that was happening that made me write what I wrote in "Solidarity and Falling Apart" because I think it's so chronic—like, the issues that namely trans women of color experience, black trans women, [00:14:00] and also just people who are assaulted, who are traumatized, who experience gendered and sexualized kind of structural violence, including through the carceral state. I think it is so normalized and so chronic that there wasn't just like one event to point to. So kind of like in Trump 1.0, there were so many different things that were happening, right? I think just that whole experience of going through Trump 1.0 and then leading into COVID. I mean, I write in the piece about a Latina trans activist in New York City named Lorena Borjas, who died in April, 2020, very early on in the pandemic and of COVID, and

Cecilia Gentili, who was another New York City based trans activist and writer, and who has actually now passed away. [00:15:00] [Gentili] wrote a piece that actually ended up in the *New York Times* about the loss of this woman's life and how it affected so many other people, how it became this–just losing this person, even as it was so commonplace, it was one of the first documented deaths of a trans woman activist at this time, you know, from COVID. And I think it's actually worth reading the quote from the piece by Cecilia Gentili, who says: "Many of us have been forsaken by our families, found ourselves homeless and deprived of support from teachers, coworkers, and employers. We've lived through extreme poverty, have made cohabitation with risk and danger part of our normal. Transgender women of color–like she was, like I am–know the uncertainty of taking each step as if it may be our last. We know the weariness of walking under the weight of transphobia, racism, and misogyny."

[00:15:53] **Alyson:** So she's writing this at the beginning of COVID, you know, and I think losing this person is what [00:16:00] makes her wanted to write about this. But again, it's just is so commonplace. So I think, I mean there were many things swirling around for me when I wrote my piece, in that context. I mean, it was also meant to be, like I said, a kind of extension of the final chapter of my book, which was an intervention into the DSM-5 diagnosis of female sexual interest/arousal disorder. I basically extend my critique of that diagnosis– and it's gendering and racializing the idea that only white women are affected by certain kinds of sexual problems, and that it's this kind of cis, straight issue of women's low desire–I try to extend this to think about the actual traumas that people experience, particularly women and feminized people. I extend that discussion into a different diagnosis, which is CPTSD, complex post-traumatic stress disorder, [00:17:00] and in the piece I kind of take that on to say, okay, in the early nineties, Judith Herman, who's widely recognized as like an important kind of feminist, psychoanalyst thinker, invokes or, you know, kind of creates this new diagnosis, CPTSD, to say that women too experience trauma, you know, can experience post-traumatic stress disorder going beyond just male soldiers, for instance, and the shellshock they might experience. And she extends it to say, for example, domestic violence. Like, this is this kind of chronic, ongoing experience that some women have, and it needs to be examined in this kind of chronic way. But even with that diagnosis, she still ends up maintaining certain, I think, fairly conservative, psychoanalytic ideas about what trauma looks like, including around dissociation, including around certain responses.

[00:17:57] **Alyson:** And my argument in this piece for [00:18:00] *The Cripistemologies of Crisis* special section is to say: What about people who don't have the hallmarks of trauma, who don't exhibit symptoms in the same way, you know, or whose symptoms aren't identifiable within a white, historically conservative psychoanalytic lexicon? So I think about what this looks like for different populations of people–again, femme, feminine, and feminized people. And then I'm also kind of pushing back, within the psychological literature, on the idea that the whole point of having a diagnosis is to figure out how to correct and cure and make people in a population work harder and be more productive under neoliberal, racial capitalism. And so my ultimate argument in this piece is: What can we learn from people who are traumatized, who [00:19:00] are violated, and who have different kinds of experiences that may not reflect the normal ways of thinking about trauma or its symptomology, but who also have taken care of each other in the face of that, and who have come together and have found ways to support each other. And that's kind of the idea of solidarity and falling apart. And so, the idea is to think beyond just healing or cure within that neoliberal framework, but instead: What does it look like to heal alongside other people who are still harmed, but still surviving and still making space for themselves and each other in a world that doesn't want them, that doesn't take their pain seriously.

[00:19:45] **Theodora:** Well, as I was rereading our introduction, I was reminded of the time that we spent on *time*. There is a concern, right, about the way in which disability is in some sort of a suspended present [00:20:00] and the notion of a past, a history, and the notion of a future are not afforded in the temporality that disability and crip experience operates. And so, I think thinking about both of your pieces and what the work that your analysis is doing is super important to both of these things. With Alyson, the thinking and work that you're doing with rethinking trauma and gender and this notion of *un*-narratability actually being about this political agenda not to listen, and the illegibility. And then with Jess we're sort of then looking at a text that offers [00:21:00] us a sort of roadmap for what futures could look like, and that both of these things also operate through specific orientations to understanding disability as relational.

[00:21:16] **Aly:** Part of what Angela Carter's piece does so well is recognize this activism–the sort of powerful moment in González 's speech. Angela Carter reads X González's speech in March for Our Lives rally, where González holds the stage for the number of minutes that the gun violence assault at the school was happening. And I think that there is something in both Angela's reading and the move that she makes or leverages to see that as crip theorizing that I think is so in line with the [00:22:00] move of disability justice activism and the recognizing that Crip wisdom is happening across spaces that we may or may not look to as sources of Crip and disability knowledge.

[00:22:14] **Aly:** You know, part of what we were theorizing in the introduction was what we lose in this sort of urgency that crisis rhetoric mobilizes–that so many disabled people's lives and thinking just can't keep up with–and that's one of the places of harm that crisis rhetoric or crisis, I dunno. Capitalism mobilizes is that things move so fast, that intervention feels impossible. It feels urgent in ways that actually forward so much erasure. And so thinking about what that insistence that we hold time and space, even when it's uncomfortable, even when this sort of like [00:23:00] demand for action and response is so strong, which is sort of what that moment that Angela writes about to me kind of encapsulates: to call into question not just the idea that, you know, this crisis is exceptional, but also that "crisis" has to create equally urgent responses in ways that elide consideration of disabled people's lives, people of color's lives, queer people's lives that are so easy to dismiss in the service of urgent action.

[00:23:37] **Aly:** And that to me is what feels particularly relevant to the moment we're in when chaos is the point. And there is so much urgency–manufactured urgency, but strategic urgency–and if we can't hold the space and even allow those sort of [00:24:00] moments of silence to let all the voices that are impacted come to the surface, that to me feels like just as much of an urgent project as to hold the space where we can have considered conversation, where the silences can actually be read and heard and mined.

[00:24:20] **Alyson:** Just quickly–just thinking about the silences and the spaces of silence that we can read in different ways, but that are often kind of understood as *illegible*, really connects to part of what I'm arguing in in my essay, which is that there is this particular way that trauma is supposed to look, and even if you have CPTSD, this is what it looks like, and it's this kind of dissociation and it's this symptomology. And also–kind of like ontologically–to framings of trauma is the idea that it's unspeakable, which I think Theodora mentioned briefly about my piece as well, that it's unspeakable. [00:25:00] But what I'm trying to kind of raise is not to say ddissociation doesn't happen–because yes, it happens to people, many people, who have experienced traumatizing events–but it doesn't always register in the exact same way. It doesn't look the same way. Not everyone can afford to have the same experience of being traumatized. And so that's where I think race and class and being of different kinds of gender statuses–you know, like a non-cis, legible status, certain kinds of feminist status–it's just not going to read the same way. But to get to the point that Aly was–that I want to connect to–is that it requires kind of like a different kind of communication.

[00:25:44] **Alyson:** And so in this idea of falling apart and solidarity within that, is the idea that there can be new and different ways of communicating about trauma or expressing it or coming together around shared experiences or experiences that are not the exact same, [00:26:00] that different people may actually experience differently because of race and gender and class differences, but that there can still be support systems and support networks around experiences like this, and that that is already happening. It's part of disability justice frameworks, right? That people like Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha are talking about, and other folks.... But yeah, that we could pay attention. Like, what would it mean to pay attention to what is already happening, and what forms of communication are occurring, that might be more affective, or might be just demonstrated through various kinds of support or through holding space for people's silences, rather than being expected to try to narrate and fail, or, I don't know, the ways that this is often read.

[00:26:48] **Jess:** I just wanted to pick up on this thread of the sort of context of crip of color critique that we were thinking [00:27:00] within, and I think the difference for me between when we wrote this issue and now is immersing myself more in what are some are calling southern disability studies. And when I first wrote my piece, I didn't live in the borderlands, and I live in the borderlands now. So what comes up for me is the scale of the crisis is so much bigger than I realized when I was first writing. I live next to one of the busiest border crossings in the world, and there are tens of thousands of people trying to come to where I live in San Diego to seek asylum. And at various points, the process of legally requesting asylum has been shut down: COVID, and now all sorts of emergency declarations. And so people are still trying. There's now a 30-foot border wall that people try to climb, [00:28:00] and there are coyotes that put up ladders on both sides, but they have limited time because of the surveillance. And so, people try to climb, and then they fall from this wall. And there are people trying to climb through the ocean. And so weekly, there are stories of boats that are found overturned, or that have crashed, and people have drowned. And there are also people trying to cross through the desert in terrible weather, either in the heat or the extreme cold. And there are organizations devoted to providing water to folks–they go out, they hike out and they put water in the desert–and those folks have been criminalized.

[00:28:43] **Jess:** So I guess what I'm trying to say is the amount of death is unfathomable. What I'm trying to get at is *unfathomability*, and how have crip knowledges–especially activist knowledges–how have we tried to grapple with this [00:29:00] unfathomability, and I think that the power of silence is one of the ways that we've tried to do that, right? A moment of silence, moments of silence, just being with each other. I don't know. I'd love to think more about that with you all, but that was something that was coming up for me in this conversation about silence.

[00:29:22] **Theodora:** Also what's on my mind is what's going on in Gaza and Palestine, and that's also in this category of like the unfathomable, yeah. I think I'm grappling with the silence because I think there's silence that is, you know, maybe important, but then there's like two kinds of silences, right? And then there's the silence that is harmful. So how can we differently describe the silence of maybe listening. I don't know….Would it be like a crip silence versus a hegemonic silence? I don't know.

[00:30:00] **Aly:** Yeah, versus the silence that hides the scale that you're talking about, Jess– like, just the sheer scale of devastation and harm, like silence as deployed by the very systems that benefit from the erasure of those harms, and the silence that–interventions into those systems of oppression are meant to intervene in. And I mean that's I think part of why time and considered thinking, alongside organizing work, is also necessary–why these are sort of two, in the best cases, collaborative projects where we can be thinking about how to parse through the multiple ways that silence can get wielded as a tool of harm, and how we can subvert it, while at the same time having activists and organizers present us with the actual landscape, and gather on the ground, [00:31:00] the true picture of scale that I think is so hard to see.

[00:31:05] **Theodora:** You know, what this turn in the discussion is doing is maybe sort of bringing us to how there's a certain context that we're now faced with, and maybe grappling with in terms of how can we theorize and respond and work towards justice in this context of massive scale of mass death and disablement. But then also this context of fabricated instability that foments this constant emergency, at least within our nation-state. While it is all something that, you know, sort of moves us to want to act, I think what folks are saying is that there's a component [00:32:00] also of listening and mapping that maybe isn't as fast and immediate.

[00:32:05] **Alyson:** If we pay attention to the kinds of destruction and mass disablement and death that Jess is describing, it can like create, it's like: freeze! Like, you don't even know what to do. And I think that's a feeling that a lot of people are having right now. And so, when I am having conversations with people around organizing and around just like, literally, what can we–what can people do? First of all, I mean, some people–I think what we're all talking about to some degree is that–some folks have been doing it for a long time, right? And some of us here have been, in different ways, but also we can pay attention to other people who do the work to sustain their own lives and the lives of their kin and friend groups and families.

[00:32:52] **Alyson:** And yeah, I don't know. It might be a moment to like take stock, to pay more attention to look at that. [00:33:00] I listened to an episode of the *Death Panel* podcast recently with Vicky Osterweil and Beatrice Adler-Bolton–I think that Jess was on actually a different episode, so maybe they can talk about that–but it was a good episode, and Vicky was talking about that you just have to do–like, to some degree, the stuff that we do can be really small. It can be like: every day, you just do a little thing. And partially because we need to survive, and also because we care about our neighbors surviving, and our neighborhoods, and our communities. I mean, it's mutual aid, right? Jess talked about anarchism. I mean, it's just some basic mutual aid, anarchist kinds of strategies that disabled people have had to do for a long time. So, I don't know. I'm thinking about that–and it can also be fun. I know that none of this has sounded fun at all, and we're not talking about things that are fun.

[00:34:00] **Alyson:** So this is a weird shift in the conversation, and maybe this is not the right moment for it, but I think at some point in this podcast, it would be good to say: well, what actually does it mean to try to hold onto some semblance of freaking joy and pleasure in the face of all of this right now? I was thinking–I was hoping, Jess, you could maybe go back briefly to silence as a kind of strategy, of like a productive, useful strategy for disabled folks. Because I heard what [Theodora] was saying about there's different ways of thinking about silence, and I think in my piece, I'm talking more about the problems with silencing.

[00:34:38] **Jess:** I guess I was thinking about the "moment of silence" that often occurs like at a rally, or a protest, or a gathering–and also, the ways that people use the vigil as a strategy, which is, you know, a mostly silent gathering of people, you know, with candles. [00:35:00] Or I've also been at protests where people are mostly quietly making art together, making a mural, or chalking the streets. And you know, I think that could also occur. I've also witnessed it occur in digital spaces, where people have asked to take a moment of silence, or to be together through a visualization or a meditation. I was also thinking about silence as a survival strategy, you know, and the way that sometimes remaining silent is how someone gets through traumatic experience, or the ways that—like, something that happens to me sometimes, when I might be triggered or dysregulated, is that I experience–what do they call it–selective mutism, or I have difficulty speaking, and you know, that's been very hard in the past. But in my healing process, I've been working on accepting that [00:36:00] that's part of what my body is doing to help me get through the moment.

[00:36:05] **Jess:** So, I dunno. Those are some of the things that I was thinking about in terms of silence, and I absolutely agree that silence is also weaponized and used to obscure epistemologies and erase knowledge all the time. And we definitely live, I think, in a culture where that is preferred as a way of maintaining the status quo, versus other places I've been in the world. I went to Argentina last summer, which had this terrible military dictatorship, which disappeared 30,000 people between 1976 and 1983. And the culture there is very much oriented towards what they call "memory work." You know, there are people who are memory workers who create museums and, you know, do investigative journalism, and those kinds of things.... But it's also part of the [00:37:00] culture that people go to these museums and memory spaces, and they talk all the time. You know, they have dinner very late, and then they stay after dinner and talk for two or three hours. So it's an everyday practice of engaging in memory work. And so, I think that that's a very different orientation in parts of the south that are part of the Global South, I want to say. So, I don't know. Those are some of the things I was thinking about.

[00:37:29] **Alyson:** Thank you so much, Jess. That makes so much sense. And the one thing that did just come up really briefly for me is just–I'm thinking about when people, when groups are silent, like, where the onus falls on, whose responsibility it is to pay attention, to think about why the silence is occurring. And I think that's really useful too, to think about: Well, if a group is silent because they need to take a step back, they need to be silent, maybe then other people should be stepping [00:38:00] in to try to listen, to try to discern what's going on, and then raise that story, right? Like raise it up from the folks who maybe are tired of trying to speak or tell their story too.

[00:38:12] **Aly:** Yeah, I don't know. I'm thinking about–this is Aly–that something that you were talking about, Jess—like, the ways that silence is produced from your very specific bodymind experience, that comes from a context of overstimulation. I relate to that. I think one of the biggest things that has changed for me since the first *Cripistemologies of Crisis* issue and now is I've gotten a lot more disabled, I've gotten sicker, I've gotten more pain in ways that have really fundamentally changed sort of how I move in the world. And from that, I have changed, sort of, some methodologies of writing and thinking. It's produced a different way of being–not just being in the world, but thinking and doing my work. And so, thinking about that, [00:39:00] you talked about the sort of healing journey, it's like seeing silence as something that–I am projecting now, so I'll just own it–For me, the silence has also been, I think, part of seeing it not as I can't interact with the world right now–not that my body is producing silence–but it *needs* silence. Like, I need to sort of—"sensory detox" is probably not necessarily the best word, but that's how I've been kind of thinking about it–in order to reengage in meaningful ways. And the world has gotten a lot smaller, because I've needed a lot more time and space and quiet.

[00:39:42] **Aly:** And that's fundamentally changed how I've interacted with the world, but it's not necessarily like, I think what it would be read outside as loss, but it's also been restorative and healing. And there's a connection here that I'm trying to make about the sort of [00:40:00] crip silence that you're talking about, Theodora—like, it's conditioned by the pressure of the world around us or by disablement. But part of what cripistemologies do is sort of find ways through that and find survival mechanisms in hostile environments and worlds. And I think that's the difference. It's like we need a thing, but then for me–again, I'm projecting keep it close–for me, I have needed that silence. I have needed quiet, and I've needed to be a lot more deliberate about how I engage with the world, which has actually helped me target energies in ways that have been far more meaningful. And it's not like to revalue it, right? I think there's always this danger where cripistemologies is like: Oh, we produce valuable knowledge from our disabled bodymind, so it's all fine. Now, it does kind of [00:41:00] suck. It can come from really, really terrible traumas and painful ways of being in the world. But out of necessity, we have found ways to live and move in that, and that is what's helped me see when silence is, for me, necessary and restorative, versus when I am conditioned to be silent as survival mechanism from a world that is asking me to be that way. Those are two very different things.

[00:41:28] **Alyson:** I really appreciate what you're saying, Aly, and I really appreciate the idea of crip silence. I have also felt really bad in the last few years and, as a pretty serious migraine sufferer–I didn't talk about my own disabilities, and I don't need to have that as part of my bio, but I have terrible, terrible migraines that are increasing, and a lot of chronic pain, and autoimmune disorders, and various other structural bodily conditions that cause me pain—and it's been so bad in the last several years. But there has been some [00:42:00] respite in just being quiet and cultivating a practice of just being quiet and being silent and.... Yeah, I just wanted to flag that that really resonated with me.

[00:42:10] **Aly:** I'm thinking about what "solidarity and falling apart" looks like. I think for me it comes partly from not that something is inexpressible, but that it doesn't have to be [expressed]—the removal of the imperative to give something language is what community gives you. And what that kind of connection—like: I see you move in a particular way, and I know you're hurting; or, I see your engagement with the world change, and I know something about that, not because I know exactly what you feel, but because I can mobilize a certain kind of knowledge that either I have, or I'm in relation to other people [who] have. And then we don't have to say the thing. And that, that to me, I think is a [00:43:00] building block of crip community spaces, and I think that can be a building block for something.

[00:43:06] **Jess:** I wanted to at some point bring up, because I wrote my piece about speculative fiction, about a novel–but maybe I could connect it here to think about the ways that art and music and poetry have been used by disabled, mad, neurodivergent folks to both convey the unfathomable, or the things that are difficult to say, and to be with each other when we can't always be with each other physically or virtually. And so, I also think a lot about that these are places where we imagine crip futurity, and we imagine alternative futures. We imagine how we're going to survive. We imagine worlds that we [00:44:00] might thrive in. Walidah Imarisha uses the term *visionary fiction*, which is thinking about fiction in particular that sort of allows us to play around with different responses and solutions, to also sort of imagine—which is what Octavia Butler was doing, where she was like: Well if things keep going the way that they are, this is what I think is going to happen—But it's also a place that we can sort of imagine how different responses might work out, and see where they end up. And *Parable [of the Sower]* is very much doing that sort of thinking. There's this sort of mishmash between the folks that want to sort of hunker down and ignore what's happening and maintain the status quo, versus this teenager who is [saying]: We can't. We have to adapt, we have to adapt to current realities, and we have to create new ways of living and being in relation. And it turns out that she's right.

[00:44:58] **Jess:** So I do think that I've just [00:45:00]—and also turning back to Alyson's point about where we finding joy—I've definitely been reading a lot of science fiction and speculative fiction lately. I'm finding a lot of joy in that, and in ways in being, you know, with others through that. But I do—and maybe Alyson could talk a little bit more about white feminism and eugenics—but there is a long history of sort of utopian, speculative fiction also being used to promote eugenics ideas and to imagine a wonderful future that is done by getting rid of disabled people, getting rid of madness, getting rid of neurodivergence. You know, just thinking about—Alison Kafer talked about this in *Feminist, Queer, Crip*—the book by Marge Piercy....What's it called?

[00:45:53] **Alyson:** *Woman on the Edge of Time*?

[00:45:54] **Jess:** *Woman on the Edge of Time*, yes! And how that book brings about its feminist future [00:46:00] precisely by getting rid of crip futurity. And so, yeah. I think there's a lot of danger there. And so, what does it mean to [have] instead speculative fiction that is exactly imagining what crip futurity, mad futurity, neurodivergent futurity—like, what all of that looks like, in giving us these horizons that we can keep striving towards. So, yeah. Being creative, and reading other people's creative work right now, is definitely what's giving me joy in the moment.

[00:46:34] **Alyson:** I feel like I have to kind of backtrack a little bit out of the joy, unfortunately, to go back to—as I said, in an unhappy way—to white feminism and carceral feminism and the ways that anti-trans ideologies are being not only taken up publicly and popularly and culturally, but now enforced through governmental [00:47:00] policy, edicts, and things. So, yeah. I mean, I'm just thinking about J.K. Rowling's support for the–what was it called? The Scotland for Women Commission [For Women Scotland], whatever it was—that just pushed the U.K. Supreme Court to define a woman as someone who is, supposedly, biologically a woman and to cut out trans women from that definition. And then thinking about the U.S. situation, with the White House's [Executive Order] "Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government." Unfortunately, in 2025, I think that what I was writing about in this piece, and what you all were writing about—what this entire special section is about—is more relevant than ever. It's really coming to pass, like that these terrible things are happening and becoming worse and worse, and we have to push back against them. [00:48:00] I mean, the good news is that even though this Supreme Court decision did happen in the U.K., thousands of people came out and protested. People are protesting and pushing back, and there are amazing, on-the-ground movements that are recentering trans women, and are looking toward gender abolition, and are highly utopian, right? And are thinking in beautiful, amazing ways, and also centering disabled folks within that as well.

[00:48:30] **Alyson:** I'm still trying to find joy. I think I don't have a lot of access to joy on a daily basis, unfortunately, but I am trying to figure out more and more ways to connect with that. Maybe I should get some reading recommendations from Jess. But yeah. I mean, doing various mutual aid, you know, when there's like, when we have space to do things like that, I think is one place. Taking time for crip silence. I play music–something I do… [00:49:00] and those are spaces where I find joy.

[00:49:02] **Theodora:** I think what you were saying about mutual aid as a space to find joy is totally valid. I feel like organizing, for me, has been a space to find joy, because the alternative to me is not viable—not just not joyful, but not viable. I wanted to throw in something about the late capitalist corporate university, and how weirdly, as an adjunct who has always been contingent, always, officially never having job security, I think in this dark way, there is a hope with what's happening that now people are seeing, or maybe–you know, to me it's, well, it was always like this—but to some people, it's now suddenly like this. And you know, there's something to being able to see more starkly the ways in which even an [00:50:00] idealized space such as a university is actually deeply enmeshed with capitalism. And all of the terrible things that go with it is also an opportunity, you know, to find new spaces for our work.

[00:50:15] **Aly:** I really like the "what is happening has always been happening." I've been thinking about joy, I think, in a couple of different ways. Like, I am about to take over as Director of Graduate Studies, and this is something that I've wanted: an administrative role in shepherding the Disability Studies program. And also, it's an institutional leadership role at a time when you are showing an attachment to a system that is deeply problematic and deeply harmful, but also trying to understand why. There are parts of the job that are actually joyful when we strip away all of the [00:51:00] harms that happen in the university, and all of the pressures to turn it into a business, and all the ways that it already has become a business that is just extractive of graduate student labor, adjunct labor, undergraduate student loan/financial aid to feed a much bigger beast. But then, all of that sort of strips away in moments with students where they are hopeful and they are joyful and they are taking ideas that you present to them, and they are running with them in new ways.

[00:51:32] **Aly:** And so I think a lot about [how] the job now feels just a little bit more like holding the walls so students can experience the joy—holding the walls of the pressure that they're under, and the world that is sort of pushing down on them to operationalize their education into skills and careers. And I don't know… that to me feels like the most urgent task in all of the thing that's happening in university [00:52:00] spaces right now. And that's the piece that I'm excited about. I also don't want to say joy only happens in our jobs—that's a problematic sort of thing. But I don't think—like, there's a reason we all went into this kind of work: that thinking is joyful, and seeing students think is joyful. And so, finding ways to sort of protect that, and let that help us build the kind of future that we can't maybe see because we're all so tired and beat down from being in the institutional space along. I don't know.

[00:52:37] **Theodora:** I think that is really beautiful, and I think we all relate to this infusion of joy that we get from our students.

[00:52:45] **Alyson:** I totally agree with you, and I really appreciate you saying that, Aly, because it is! It's awesome to be with students right now who are excited about things still, who are learning and who are pissed [00:53:00] and who are like: I cannot believe this carceral bullshit; I want to abolish the State and capitalism and ableism and white supremacy. I mean, it's so beautiful. And so, yeah. I don't think we have to be "Rah! Rah! Institutions" to love supporting and working with students. But there are other spaces too, right? I'm not in the classroom at the moment, and just finding spaces where you can support folks as they develop knowledge, and where they can help you develop knowledge, and where you can share experiences and cripistemologically hang out and develop cripistemologies together I think is really cool and really special and joyful and pleasurable right now.

[00:53:49] **Theodora:** Thank you so much to all of you for making the time for this conversation. And reflecting and creatively thinking [00:54:00] together, and for all of your wonderful selves in individual and shared spaces.

[00:54:14] **Delores:** Thank you again, Theodora, Jess, Aly, and Alyson, for this engaging discussion of crip silences, crip futurities, and crip joy. We'd also like to thank the entire *Positions* editorial and production team, along with our co-producers, whose work makes these episodes possible. And we also thank you, our audience, for your time and attention today. If you haven't already, please make sure to subscribe to us wherever you listen to your podcast, and join us for the next episode of *Positions: The Podcast of the Cultural Studies Association*, where we'll tackle other essential and engaging topics.

Credits

Produced by Mark Nunes and Elaine Venter

Season Two
Hosted by Delores B. Phillips
Production by: Sully Styles, Lead Audio Engineer; and Mark Nunes
Editorial by Mark Nunes, Theodora Danylevich, Anthony Grajeda, Howard Hastings, Reed Van Schenck, Kathalene Razzano, Jennifer Scuro, and Elaine Venter
Music by Matt Nunes < https://open.spotify.com/artist/5r7EEqpB7cPsBRRV9ek1Ia?si=hdJkJavJQtid6R1VrkJDLg>

Notes

1. This title is an homage and reference to Ellen Samuels, "Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (2017): https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v37i3.5824. < https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v37i3.5824> ↩

2. Theodora Danylevich and Alyson Patsavas, eds., “Cripistemologies of Crisis: Emergent Knowledges for the Present,” *Lateral* 10, no. 1 (2021): https://csalateral.org/archive/section/cripistemologies-of-crisis. < https://csalateral.org/archive/section/cripistemologies-of-crisis/> ↩

3. Barbara Smith, Cherríe Moraga, and other women of color feminist uplifted the kitchen table as a site of radical feminist knowledge production. ↩

4. I want to thank my friends Denise Pike and Maya Larson for taking notes as I verbally processed this essay and for helping me put the commas where they were missing. ↩

5. Giorgio Agamben,*State of Exception* (University of Chicago Press, 2005). ↩

6. I’m currently reading a riveting book on the history of the Oxford English Dictionary. Spoiler alert: there is a fascinating mad, neurodivergent, and disabled presence in this archive. Sarah Ogilvie, *The Dictionary People: The Unsung Heroes Who Created the Oxford English Dictionary* (Vintage, 2024). ↩

7. Etymonline, s.v. “Crisis – Etymology, Origin & Meaning,” https://www.etymonline.com/word/crisis < https://www.etymonline.com/word/crisis> . ↩

8. Merriam Webster Online, s.v. “Definition of CRISIS,” https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/crisis. < https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/crisis> ↩

9. I use the term “bodymind” following many of my mentors in disability studies and disability communities who refuse the pervasiveness of the Cartesian split and use the term to signify the inextricability of cognitive processes from those of the material body. See Margaret Price, “The Bodymind Program and the Possibilities of Pain,” *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (2015): 268–84, https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12127 < https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12127> . ↩

10. This sentence has stuck with me for nearly twenty years since I heard it in an episode of *Queer as Folk*. Kelly Makin, “Big Fucking Mouth,” *Queer as Folk*, season 3, episode 9, Showtime, 2003. ↩

11. *White Supremacy Culture*, https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/. ↩

12. Ibid. ↩

13. I am referencing a quote by disability activist and author Neil Marcus, “Disability is not a brave struggle or ‘courage in the face of adversity.’ Disability is an art. It’s an ingenious way to live.” Neil Marcus, Rod Lathim, Roger Marcus, and Access Theater, *Storm Reading* (play), Kennedy Center, 1992. ↩

14. Interdependence is the seventh principle of disability justice. Patricia Berne, Aurora Levins Morales, David Langstaff, and Sins Invalid, “Ten Principles of Disability Justice,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 46, nos. 1–2 (2018): 227–30, https://doi.org/10.1353/wsq.2018.0003. < https://doi.org/10.1353/wsq.2018.0003> ↩

15. Allison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Indiana University Press, 2013). ↩
16. I am borrowing this term from Margaret Price, *Crip Spacetime: Access, Failure, and Accountability in Academic Life* (Duke University Press, 2024). ↩
17. Collective liberation is the tenth principle of disability justice. Berne and Levins Morales et al., “Ten Principles of Disability Justice.” ↩

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Angela M. Carter is an independent scholar, educator, and community organizer. As a Ronald E. McNair scholar, Angela became a first-generation college graduate in 2009 when she earned her BA in English from Truman State University. Dr. Carter completed her PhD.in Feminist Studies at the University of Minnesota in 2019, where she co-founded the Critical Disability Studies Collective, an academic organization advancing intersectional and critical inquiries around disability, ableism, and access. She has worked in various capacities over the last twenty years teaching, researching, and advocating around experiences of injustice and inequity in higher education. Currently, she is connecting with other disabled Minnesotans to form a grassroots community organization, AmplifyMN: A Disability Justice Collective.

View all of Angela Carter's articles.

Article details

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Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Review of *Gender/Fucking* by Florence Ashley (CLASH Books)

by Collin Hawley | Book Reviews, Issue 14.2 (Fall 2025)

ABSTRACT *Gender/Fucking*, described by author Florence Ashley as academic smut, combines erotica, theory, poetry, and personal narrative to critique and offer an alternative method to contemporary approaches within scholarly work on gender and sexuality. Ashley draws on her personal experience (though she explains that some of the narratives are hyperbolic or fabulations) of being trans, both positive and negative. She argues that academic conversations about sex should consider bodily epistemologies and move away from purely theoretical abstraction. For Ashley, sex may not be the key to liberation, but it functions as an important element of everyday life, and thus requires that scholars engage it in all its complexity, contradictions, and messiness.

KEYWORDS bodily epistemology, gender, trans studies

Gender/Fucking. By Florence Ashley. Troy, NY: CLASH Books, 2023, 167 pp. (paperback) ISBN 9781955904933. US List: $16.95

Florence Ashley's *Gender/Fucking* offers a provocative reconsideration of the heuristics of contemporary gender and sexuality studies. Her semi-autobiographical text combines smut, poetry, and theory linked by the idea of "bodily epistemology": "Some truths can only be told through the erotic. Polaroid captures of the messiness of life in its rawest forms. There's so little appreciation for the knowledge that comes with arousal. We instead associate it with unthought, with primal urges that override our ability to understand and reason" (9–10). Ashley's prose models this production of knowledge by moving seamlessly between theoretical musings and "personal"[1] narratives of trans bodily experiences, both erotic and medical. Each chapter examines a particular element of her sexual life from this mixed perspective of theory and sex. Throughout, she is unafraid of contradiction and ambiguity, instead leaning into the messiness of sexuality and life: “Trans lives are lived at a critical juncture of de/sexualization; depicted as hypersexual precisely to shame us into divesting from sex” (11–12). Using bodily epistemology as a guiding method, she challenges the desexualization that she argues suffuses academia and explains that the embodiment of sex is essential to understanding the complexity of contemporary sexual life.

Ashley uses the words in her title, “gender, fuck, and genderfuck” to describe “the political element in exploring and revealing gender through sexuality and sexuality through gender. Balancing out the medical and exclusionary resonances of the word ‘transsexual,’ genderfuck rejects neoliberal modes of living and attempts to discipline and standardize gender” (14). Chapter 1, “Sexually Transmitted Transitude” complicates the fallacious belief that transness is a “social contagion,” yet also suggests that there are “the seeds of a poetic, affective truth” that trans people are drawn to each other, love each other, and should hold “open the possibility that every cis person is in a state of becoming toward transitude” (20). Chapter 2 considers the fetishization of trans women by straight men, who are called “chasers.” She describes her ambivalence regarding their attraction to her “phallic femininity” which is “never-quite-female,” as “dystrust,” a portmanteau of dysphoria and distrust (29). Complicating attraction, she wrestles with the possibility that via patriarchal values all attraction is fetishism and is grounded in the acquisitional logics of capital.

Chapter 3 rehearses anti-trans scholarship that describes trans people as medical monstrosities that “eradicate gender nonconformity” (43), setting the stage for the thickly described narrative account of vaginoplasty (that she explains is not not autoethnographic) in chapter 4. Chapter 5 builds on the previous chapter’s possibly fictional narrative, describing her feelings of disconnection from her body and erotic self because of an excessive ease in achieving orgasm after her vaginomancy(plasty). She explains that women's orgasm for men serves as a "measure of [men's] sexual prowess" and she differentiates it from the satisfaction of desires, offering dollhood as a descriptor for this feeling of dissatisfaction, "The slut is played *with*, the doll is *played* with" (73–74, emphasis in original). In chapter 6, Ashley reflects on a painful experience of sexual abuse by a trans woman, which she agonizes over not only because of her persistent trauma but also because of her reticence to share her experience for the fear of her experience being used to further demonize trans women. In the end, returning to the messiness and contradictions of sexual life, she explains, "Neither demon nor monster, she who hurt me is human" (96).

In chapter 7, Ashley describes how gender and sexual identities do not fit into easy or fixed categories. After reflecting on her own sexual history, which became simpler with men after her vaginomancy, she offers a means of complicating sexual behaviors and choices, "Reflecting on the complexity of queerness, maybe we should better distinguish sexual comfort, sexual behavior, and sexual identity. Often, they fall out of line with one another. If sexual identity is built upon a deeper sense of self, sexual comfort is often bound up with past traumatic experience, and sexual behavior is dictated in part by who is interested in having sex with you" (105). Chapter 8 exemplifies the multi-generic composition of the text, one that incorporates poetry, erotica, and theory. This chapter, "Triton and the Nereid," complicates the adjacent chapters on the traumas and messiness within sex through a positive, mythologically inflected erotic narrative. In chapter 9, Ashley describes her fear of topping because of her trauma and fear of traumatizing others, alongside descriptions of the transmisogynistic rhetoric that trans existence is equivalent to rape (118–120). She explains the persistent pain of this hate, "My rebuttals, my human rights, my science will never satisfy, for it is my existence that offends, not what I do with it" (122).

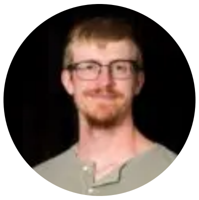
Chapter 10 returns to the notion of bodily epistemology, pushing back against the cold abstractions of academia: “Revolutionary thought begins when we realize that the ills and wells of the body are generative. That the body is not secondary, not an inconvenience to be suppressed as we pursue unearthly ideals. It comes from the realization that the rational economic mind is no rationality of ours. Abstraction is a flawed epistemology. Ours must be one of love” (150). The final chapter builds on the previous chapter with the idea of palliative activism, what she describes as a kind of “content pessimism” in the face of the intractable despair and hopelessness for change under late capitalism: “Its goal is to ease pains, like a balm after the sun; to cultivate comfort and love among the suffering” (161).

Ashley’s book, by foregrounding personal experience, demands that its readers reflect and reconsider how sex is conceptualized in academic discourse and, as a result, is discursively incomplete in these spaces. By re-injecting sex into sexuality studies, Ashley illustrates the importance of rejecting monolithic conceptions of gender and sexual experience and its contradictory embodiments: “Sex is messy; that’s what I love about it. It is pleasure and pain; it is ambivalent, ambiguous. It is human—part of the multiplicity in our beings that does not, should not be singled out for severance from those of us who house it. Sexuality is not liberation, but perhaps we can learn about the path to liberation from it” (12–13). Scholars in the fields of gender and sexuality studies, including but not limited to those interested in trans studies, will find Ashley’s provocations and complications of contemporary sexual practices useful to their work.

Notes

1. She explains that these narratives are both fictionalized and semi-fictionalized. ↩

Author Information



Collin Hawley

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Lateral

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Review of *Disability Works: Performance After Rehabilitation* by Patrick McKelvey (New York University Press)

by Travis York | Book Reviews, Issue 14.2 (Fall 2025)

ABSTRACT In *Disability Works: Performance After Rehabilitation*, Patrick McKelvey traces the "confluences and contradictions" at play in disabled performance groups' relationships to the US government's vocational rehabilitation programs in the mid- to late-twentieth century. Grounding theatrical performance as an embodied display of and resistance to rehabilitation, McKelvey weaves together performance studies and disability studies to complicate common narratives of disability rights history. In doing so, this book provides a basis for future work that may emerge at the nexus of performance, disability, and history.

KEYWORDS disability studies, history, labor, performance, rehabilitation, rights

Disability Works: Performance After Rehabilitation. By Patrick McKelvey. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2024, 331 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-1-4798-2487-8. US List: $32.00.

Just as vocational rehabilitation programs of the postwar United States proliferated "a new itinerary for what disability might come to mean," Patrick McKelvey's *Disability Works: Performance After Rehabilitation* offers a thoughtful new line of inquiry for the field of disability performance studies (10). Centering his work within the field of disability and performance studies, McKelvey makes an archival turn to retrace how "rehabilitation, as both policy and cultural paradigm, simultaneously structured and was structured by theatrical contests over the role of compulsory labor as the basis of disabled citizenship" (5).

Exploring the interactions between disabled performance groups and rehabilitation services in the United States leading up to the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, McKelvey proposes that an in-depth analysis of disability performance in this era complicates and disrupts current notions of disability history and activism. Urging disability and performance studies to take a turn toward the archive, McKelvey focuses on historical theatrical performance to highlight several innately crip modes of existence within the height of vocational rehabilitation's dominance in disability rights. Taking up theatrical performance specifically, McKelvey highlights how disabled performance was not limited to the stage. Vocational rehabilitation's methods of "preparing disabled people for the workforce, both in and beyond theatre, through iterative, embodied, mimetic practices" aimed to enforce "proper, economically productive middle-class norms" within disabled communities (6). *Disability Works* extends the field of disability performance studies through an intimate analysis of historical theatrical performance organizations to complicate narratives of disabled activism in the second half of the twentieth century, showing that "vocational rehabilitation took place *as* performance and required a broad array of theatrical practices and institutions to accomplish its goals" (16, emphasis in original).

Introducing "disability works" as "the performance institutions and practices that promulgated labor as either an aspiration for or a problem within disability policy and activism," McKelvey illustrates the complex negotiations of labor's role within disability rights (17–18). As McKelvey shows throughout this book, while vocational rehabilitation programs attempted to imagine new labor forces within disabled communities, disabled activists and performers both endorsed and contested this locating of proper citizenship within the framework of labor. Above all, *Disability Works* speaks to the "confluences and contradictions" present within disabled performance works of the mid- to late-twentieth century (18).

Each chapter studies a different performance organization's relationship to rehabilitation and disabled activism, archiving various performance organizations' histories chronologically from the postwar period to the passing of the ADA. For McKelvey, performance not only informs disability history but complicates our narratives of such a history. McKelvey separates his work from others in the field by focusing on performance organizations' relations to the vocational rehabilitation machine that dominated this era's discussions of disability rights. As historians of disability have begun to question the progress narrative of the disability rights movement, McKelvey centers this questioning within the realm of performance.

Beginning in chapter 1 with Plays for Living and the Office for Vocational Rehabilitation, McKelvey investigates how rehabilitation programs, playwrights, and those involved in Plays for Living negotiated the narratives present in disabled performances. This chapter explores the burgeoning vocational rehabilitation programs in the United States and their initial excursions into performance within the 1950s and 1960s. From the beginning, McKelvey highlights the simultaneous friction and coherence between disabled performance and rehabilitation in an era when disabled communities began to find themselves in the spotlight of American debates over independence and interdependence.

The next organization McKelvey analyzes is the National Theatre for the Deaf (NTD) from 1966 to 1978, examining how the NTD incorporated rehabilitation narratives into its work. Chapter 2 shows how the NTD emphasized rehabilitation strategies sponsored by the government and the employment prospects of disabled individuals, especially those within the Deaf community. This chapter begins to introduce the interconnectedness that was perceived between disability and Blackness in the United States, a legacy that escalated through rehabilitation programs. The legacy of such a connection, in which white vocational rehabilitation with its focus on independence and the growing labor force was contrasted to Black public assistance programs that supposedly “drained the nation’s coffers,” weaves itself through the narratives McKelvey draws out throughout the book (93).

The friction between adhering to rehabilitative structures and imagining new ways of viewing disability becomes most apparent in McKelvey’s third chapter, in which he highlights the legacy and work of disabled playwright Ron Whyte and the National Task Force for Disability and the Arts. McKelvey explores how Whyte utilized government funding for disabled performance works to employ disabled survival strategies and imagine new structures to care for disabled communities. This chapter calls attention to the ways disabled performers were able to create spaces of imagining otherwise *within* the structures of rehabilitation programs and the funding they provided.

Following the relationship between Ron Whyte and Gregory Battcock from 1972 to 1977 through the form of letters written between the two, chapter 4 of *Disability Works* introduces the term “bureaucratic drag” to describe both the violence of administrative delays and how crip performance was able to theatricalize these same bureaucratic processes. As a “configuration of crip time,” “bureaucratic drag” as both “an obstacle to and a strategy for disability organizing and performance on and against work” becomes a major intervention of *Disability Works* (144). McKelvey shows how the “links between bureaucracy and failure” were theatricalized through this practice of bureaucratic drag (166).

Returning to more traditionally defined theatrical performance, chapter 5 shows how the National Theatre Workshop for the Handicapped emphasized Stanislavskian acting as both a form of rehabilitation for employment and as a response to the deindustrialization of the United States in the mid- to late-1980s. Bringing together perceptions of labor and rest through performances of camp in a time of industrial change in America, McKelvey presents disability theatre as "heir to the not-entirely-compliant legacy of the queer labor of camp performance," which itself offered "a glimpse of performance *after rehabilitation* in both senses, within rehabilitation's grasp but never fully acquiescing to its demands" (209, emphasis in original). McKelvey's bringing together of camp performance and disability theatre uniquely punctuates *Disability Works*'s ability to speak across fields.

In his final chapter, McKelvey takes up Alvin Ailey's New Visions Dance Project as a form of "rehabilitative redress," a resistance to the continual debilitation of African American communities in America that existed within a "crip alternative" to the more mainstream accounts of rehabilitation in the 1980s (218). Ailey's NVDP exemplified a "rehabilitative redress" that both worked within existing structures to center awareness of ongoing anti-Black debilitation and imagined new structures which resist both normative and racialized understandings of health and autonomy (219). This framing countered the "rehabilitative individualism" that prospered under the Reagan administration, in which funding for projects such as public transportation was cut, and an emphasis began to be placed on one's individual human capital as the preferred mode to achieve access.

McKelvey's sites of analysis span the mid- to late-twentieth century, a historical moment in which disability rights movements exploded across the United States. While this book does not focus on the broader disability rights movement that took root in America during the 1960s and 70s, what would it mean for future studies of this kind to center the social activism surrounding disability at this time? Given the rapidly changing social landscape of post-World War II America, as activists ignited causes around a variety of issues, how could future work on disabled performance question the relationships between these performance-based narratives of rehabilitation and the surrounding activism occurring around disability rights? McKelvey provides an insightful expansion of current scholarship on disabled performance during this period without claiming to be the final word on the matter. In doing so, this work provides a basis for future work that may emerge at the nexus of performance, disability, and history.

While the field of disability studies, and even more specifically that of disability history, continues to expand, it will prove fruitful to continue to expand the horizons and interconnections of disability studies with other fields. McKelvey's *Disability Works: Performance After Rehabilitation* is an adept example of these expansive horizons. This rigorous study of what McKelvey calls "stagecraft and statecraft" proves the complexity of the relationship between the two (36).

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Review of *Invited to Witness: Solidarity Tourism Across Occupied Palestine* by Jennifer Lynn Kelly (Duke University Press)

by Eric W. Ross | Book Reviews, Issue 14.2 (Fall 2025)

ABSTRACT Jennifer Lynn Kelly's *Invited to Witness: Solidarity Tourism Across Occupied Palestine* is a timely and informative look at conditions on the ground in occupied Palestine. Kelly's work shows how tourists, in particular Western tourists and tourism can counter the ongoing genocide and displacement of Palestinians. Kelly offers several case studies including tours and workshops across occupied Palestine. Tourism is a performative action whereby tourists travel and eventually return home, changed in some way by the process. For Kelly, this transformative potential is what activists in Palestine are seeking to tap into. Tourists are invited to witness, and empowered to return home and work towards Palestinian liberation elsewhere.

KEYWORDS Palestine, archive, colonialism, history, memory, solidarity, tourism

> *Invited to Witness: Solidarity Tourism Across Occupied Palestine*. By Jennifer Lynn Kelly. Durham: Duke University Press, 2023, pp. 344 (Paperback) ISBN 978-1-4780-1929-9. US List $28.95.

Welcome to Palestine, your work is not here. This is the ethos that animates Jennifer Lynn Kelly's *Invited to Witness: Solidarity Tourism Across Occupied Palestine*. For Kelly, solidarity tourism represents a confluence of factors in Palestine that bring together the historical and ongoing colonial logics of Israeli occupation, the political economy of tourism, and an international solidarity movement that leads activists, scholars, artists, and tourists to visit occupied Palestine. Drawing on an extensive archive of Palestinian activism as well as ethnographic reflections of her own experience as a solidarity tourist, Kelly's intervention makes clear that tourists are invited to Palestine *as tourists*, to bear witness to Israeli settler-colonialism, but she makes it equally clear that these same tourists are invited to return home at the end of their trip. The work of solidarity tourism, for many of Kelly's Palestinian interlocutors, doesn't really begin until the tourist returns home. Along the way, Kelly's tourists encounter multiple temporalities, anguish, joy, and community, revealing a Palestine that is far more human and humane than is often depicted in Western media, especially in the United States.

Kelly argues that the tours themselves are built on colonial logics. The tours seek to expose the work of settler-colonialism in Occupied Palestine, and yet at the same time rely on a colonial logic of witnessing. Many of Kelly's tourists articulate that no amount of research or reading about Palestine could prepare them for seeing the realities of life under occupation. They also note that when they return, the report-back genre of writing produced by foreign visitors to Palestine is often taken more seriously than the myriad written and visual records left by Palestinians themselves to describe occupation. Amidst Israel's current (2023 to present) invasion and devastation of Gaza alongside spikes in violence in Jerusalem and the West Bank, Palestinians have produced even more firsthand evidence of Israel's settler colonial violence. Indeed, the current Gaza invasion is one of the most well-documented human atrocities in history, but aside from empty words and modest aid, little has been done in the United States and Europe to hold Israel accountable. This underscores Kelly's argument, and makes *Invited to Witness* an urgent book for understanding how despite overwhelming material evidence, the Western world has turned a blind eye to Israeli violence.

The first three chapters of the book emphasize the historical significance of tourism for Occupied Palestine and as a cultural battleground between Palestine and Israel. To emphasize the importance of tourism as a settler colonial strategy for Israeli settler-occupation, Kelly notes that Israel included a professional tour guide as part of their delegation to the first Oslo Accords in 1993. Thus, for Palestinians, solidarity tourism aimed at Western tourists as well as Israelis becomes a moment of rupture by utilizing the familiar genre of the walking tour to tell an unfamiliar story to tourists—a story that is unfamiliar or illegible to many Westerners because of the way Occupied Palestine is understood by Western media.

Chapter one details the emergence of solidarity tourism during the first intifada (1987–1993) when tours were outlawed by Israel, but attracted a small following through international academic and activist circles. These early tours and their subsequent report-backs established the trope of Western tourists needing to see occupation in order to believe it. The purported "necessity" of the report-back reinforces the unwillingness on the part of Western authors to cite Palestinian sources. The report-back was initially established as a rhetorical strategy to help persuade western audiences of conditions in Palestine, but has had the longer-term effect of leading many scholars and activists to ignore Palestinian literature on occupation.

In chapter two, Kelly describes how solidarity tourism was codified and legalized, and how it emerged as a challenge to the Oslo Accords by showing tourists the realities of Palestinian fragmentation while also directly challenging Israel's control of the narrative. Palestinian tour guides, Kelly notes, went to great lengths to show an alternative version of Palestinian history while also asserting the right to tourism, something most in the West take for granted.

Chapter three explores olive tree planting as solidarity tourism. Kelly shows that part of the triumphal narrative of Israeli history is that the establishment of Israel has allowed for Israelis to care for the land that had been neglected or abandoned rather than taken and dispossessed by force; Israel often points to its afforestation projects whereby trees have been planted and parks established so that Israelis can conquer the land with their feet. These projects serve two goals, argues Kelly: the first is to establish a claim to the land, the second is to hide evidence of previous occupation. Many Palestinian walking tours include visits to the ruins of former villages, some consumed by newly planted forests (87). However, to counter the claim of abandoning or neglect of the land, Palestinian organizations have invited tourists to come to Palestine and plant olive trees (88). These trees that have been cultivated by Palestinians for centuries are a rebuke of Israeli insistence on the lack of connection between the Palestinian people and the land (92). On many of these tours, however, Kelly notes that tourists witness Israeli bulldozers digging up the newly planted orchards.

The second half of the book explores solidarity tourism in Jerusalem, Gaza, and Greater Occupied Palestine. Chapter four examines the multiplicity of occupations within the city of Jerusalem: how Israelis have come to occupy Palestinian homes, to dig underneath Palestinian land to search for and claim historical artifacts, and to clear away evidence of Palestinian life. Chapter five moves into Palestine's pre-1948 borders to explore the remains of Palestinian life and livelihood in Israeli occupied cities and villages. Here, Kelly asks the question of what return will look like. Her interlocutors, organizations like Zochrot and Badil, know that these are difficult questions, but as Kelly shows, they structure their tours in such a way as to make sure that Israelis and other tourists alike understand that these are nevertheless questions that must be answered. Zochrot and Badil are both organizations built around guided tours. Zochrot offers walking tours of Palestinian villages destroyed during the Nakba, while Badil focuses on contemporary displaced Palestinians, offering a glimpse into the ongoing nature of occupation. Chapter six brings us to Gaza through media such as the "You are Not Here" virtual tour, and Anthony Bourdain's 2013 visit to Gaza, which was broadcast on CNN. These examples serve to challenge the depiction of Gaza as only a place of suffering and attempt to restore humanity and life to Gazans. The final chapter, chapter seven, returns to the tourists themselves, illustrating how many struggle to make sense of what they've seen, and how they grapple with how best to move forward.

One tourist earlier in the book remarks to Kelly, "If only there was Facebook Live when this shit happened," (145) in reference to seeing the ruins of a house demolished in 1948. As Kelly is quick to point out, however, there are house demolitions in Palestine streamed on Facebook Live every month. *Invited to Witness* suggests that this temporal distance is something that solidarity tourists must grapple with: occupation and settler colonialism are not over; they are ongoing, in Israel and in other settler-colonies like the US, Canada, and Australia. The challenge for these tour guides, according to Kelly, is to get tourists to see that which they have been conditioned not to see—to understand these issues as ongoing and not settled. Kelly's *Invited to Witness* begins to grapple with these questions and opens a conversation across multiple fields, including tourism studies, cultural studies, and social movement studies by showing how activists and organizations are utilizing memory to inform the struggle in the present, a struggle that is even more urgent in light of Israel's ongoing destruction of Gaza. There is ample evidence describing the conditions of occupation in Palestine that those of us who are in the West have been invited to witness, and it is more important than ever that Westerners finally heed the call.

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